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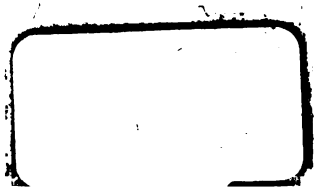

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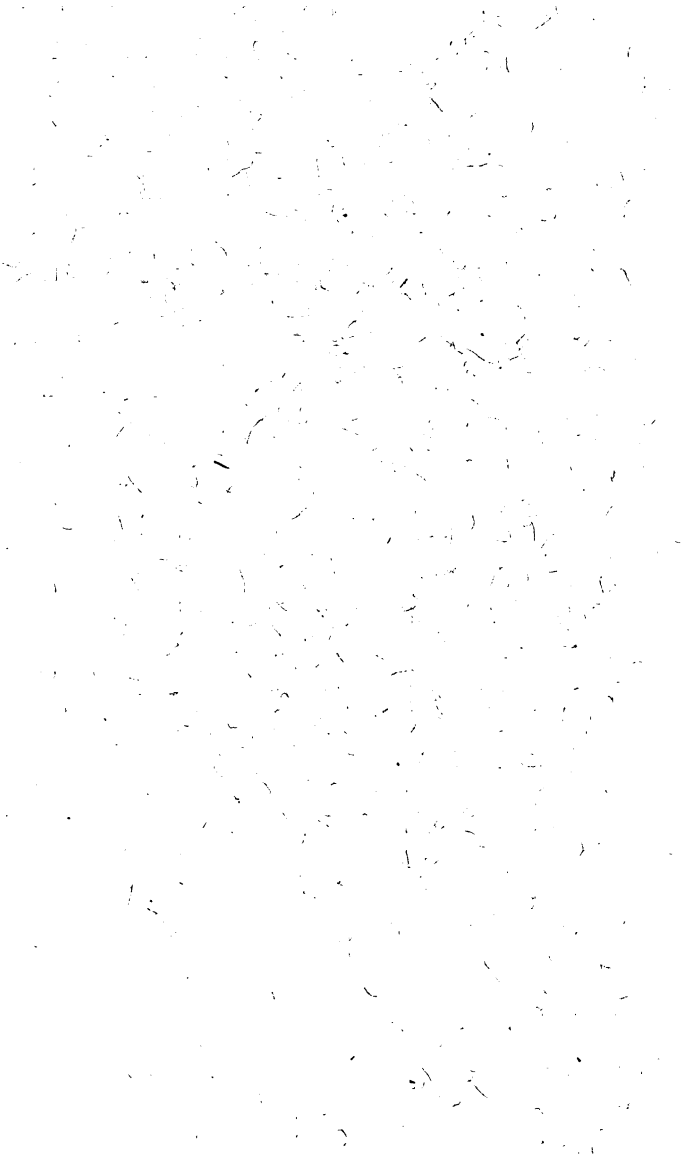

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MRS. CLIFFORD'S MARRIAGE.

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MRS. CLIFFORD'S MARRIAGE.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

THE LADIES' OPINION.

"You don't mean to say she's going to be married—not Mary? I don't believe a word of it. She was too fond of her poor husband who put such trust in her. No, no, child—don't tell such nonsense to me."

So said old Miss Harwood when the dreadful intelligence was first communicated to her. The two old sisters, who were both charitable old souls, and liked to think the best of everybody, were equally distressed about this piece of village scandal. "I don't say anything about her poor husband—he was a fool to trust so much to a woman of her age," said Miss Amelia; "but in my opinion Mary

Clifford has sense to know when she's well off." The very idea made the sisters angry: a woman with five thousand a-year, with five fine children, with the handsomest house and most perfect little establishment within twenty miles of Summerhayes; a widow, with nobody to cross or contradict her, with her own way and will to her heart's content—young enough to be still admired and paid attention to, and old enough to indulge in those female pleasures without any harm coming of it; to think of a woman in such exceptionally blessed circumstances stooping her head under the yoke, and yielding a second time to the subjection of marriage, was more than either of the Miss Harwoods could believe.

"But I believe it's quite true—indeed, I *know* it's quite true," said the curate's little wife. "Mr. Spencer heard it first from the Miss Summerhayes, who did not know what to think—their own brother, you know; and yet they couldn't forget that poor dear Mr. Clifford was their cousin; and then they are neither of them married themselves, poor dears, which makes them harder upon her."

"We have never been married," said Miss Amelia; "I don't see what difference that

makes. It is amusing to see the airs you little creatures give yourselves on the strength of being married. I suppose *you* think it's all right—it's a compliment to her first husband, eh? and shows she was happy with him?—that's what the men say when they take a second wife; that's how you would do I suppose, if"——

"Oh, Miss Amelia, don't be so cruel," cried the little wife. "I should die. Do you think I could ever endure to live without Julius? I don't understand what people's hearts are made of that can do such things: but then," added the little woman, wiping her bright eyes, "Mr. Clifford was not like my husband. He was very good, I daresay, and all that—but he wasn't ——. Well, I don't think he was a taking man. He used to sit such a long time after dinner. He used to —— it's very wicked to be unkind to the dead—but he wasn't the sort of a man a woman could break her heart for, you know."

"I should like to know who is," said Miss Amelia. "He left her everything, without making provision for one of the children. He gave her the entire power, like a fool, at her age. He did not deserve anything better;

but it appears to me that Mary Clifford has the sense to know when she's well off."

"Well, well!" said old Miss Harwood, "I couldn't have believed it, but now as you go on discussing, I daresay it'll turn out true. When a thing comes so far as to be discussed it's going to happen. I've always found it so. Well, well! love has gone out of fashion now-a-days. When I was a girl, things were different. We did not talk about it half so much, nor read novels. But we had the right feelings. I daresay she will just be as affectionate to Tom Summerhayes as she was to her poor dear husband. Oh, my dear, it's very sad—I think it's very sad—five fine children, and she can't be content with that. It'll turn out badly, dear, and that you'll see."

"He'll swindle her out of all her money," said Miss Amelia.

"Oh, don't say such dreadful things," cried the curate's little wife, getting up hastily. "I am sure I hope they'll be happy—that is, as happy as they *can* be," she added, with a touch of candid disapproval. "I must run away to baby now; the poor dear children —I must say I am sorry for them—to have another man brought in in their poor papa's

place; but oh, I must run away, else I shall be saying cruel things too."

The two Miss Harwoods discussed this interesting subject largely after Mrs. Spencer had gone. The Summerhayes people had been, on the whole, wonderfully merciful to Mrs. Clifford during her five years' solitary reign at Fontanel. She had been an affectionate wife —she was a good mother—she had worn the weeds of her widowhood seriously, and had not plunged into any indiscreet gaities when she took them off; while, at the same time, she had emerged sufficiently from her seclusion to restore Fontanel to its old position as one of the pleasantest houses in the county. What could woman do more? Tom Summerhayes was her husband's cousin; he had been brought up to the law, and naturally understood affairs in general better than she did. Everybody knew that he was an idle fellow. After old Mr. Summerhayes died, everybody quite expected that Tom would settle down in the old manor, and live an agreeable useless life, instead of toiling himself to death in hopes of one day being Lord Chancellor—a very unlikely chance at the best; and events came about exactly as everybody had predicted. At

the same time, the entire neighborhood allowed that Tom had exerted himself quite beyond all precedent on behalf of his cousin's widow. Poor Mary Clifford had a great deal too much on her hands, he was always saying. It was a selfish sort of kindness to crush down a poor little woman under all that weight of wealth and responsibility; and so, at last, here was what had come of it. The Miss Harwoods sat and talked it all over that cold day in the drawing-room of Woodbine Cottage, which had one window looking to the village-green, and another, a large, round, bright bow-window, opening to the garden. The fire was more agreeable than the garden that day. Miss Harwood sat knitting in her easy-chair, while Miss Amelia occupied herself in ticketing all that miscellaneous basket of articles destined for the bazaar of ladies' work to be held at Summerhayes in February; but work advanced slowly under the influence of such an inducement to talk. The old ladies, as may be supposed, came to a sudden pause and looked confused and guilty when the door opened and the Miss Summerhayes were announced. Perhaps the new visitors might even have heard something of the conversation

which was going on with so much animation. Certainly it came to a most abrupt conclusion, and the Miss Harwoods looked consciously into each other's faces when the ladies of the manor-house came to the door. These ladies were no longer young, but they were far from having reached the venerable certainty of old-maidenhood, which possessed the atmosphere of Woodbine Cottage. They were still in the fidgety, unsettled stage of unweddedness—women who had fallen out of their occupation, and were subject to little tempers and vapors, not from real ill-humor or sourness, but simply by reason of the vacancy and unsatisfaction of their lives. The Miss Summerhayes often enough did not know what to do with themselves; and being unphilosophical, as women naturally are, they set down this reckless condition of mind, not to the account of human nature generally, and of female impatience in particular, but to their own single and unwedded condition—a matter which still seemed capable of remedy; so that the fact must be admitted, that Miss Laura and Miss Lydia were sometimes a little flighty and uncertain in their temper; sometimes a little harsh in their judgments; and, in short, in

most matters betrayed a certain unsettledness and impatience in their minds, as people generally do, in every condition of existence, when they are discontented with their lot. The chances are that nothing would have pleased them better than to have plunged into an immediate discussion of all the circumstances of this strange piece of news with which Summerhayes was ringing; but the position was complicated by the fact that they were accompanied by little Louisa Clifford, who was old enough to understand all that was said, and quick enough to guess at any allusion which might be made to her mother, however skilfully veiled; so that, on the whole, the situation was as difficult a one for the four ladies, burning to speak but yet incapable of utterance, as can well be conceived.

"Oh, how far on *you* are," cried Miss Laura; "I have not got in half the work that has been promised to me; but you always are first with everything—first in gardening, first in working, first in"——

"All the news, I am sure," said Miss Lydia; "we, of course, never hear anything till it has happened. Provoking! Loo, shouldn't you

like to go to Miss Harwood's maid, and ask her to show you the chickens? She has a perfect genius for poultry, though she is such a little thing; and Miss Amelia has such loves of dorkings. We shan't be leaving for half an hour; now go, there's a dear!"

"Thank you, Cousin Lydia, I'd rather look at the things for the bazaar," returned Loo, lifting a pair of acute suspicious eyes; a pale-faced little creature, sharp-witted and vigilant, instinctively conscious why her amusement was thus carefully provided for—Loo did not choose to go.

"Such a nuisance!" said Miss Laura; "I say we are just far enough off at the manor to be out of reach of everything except the bores and the troubles. You always think of us when you have stupid visitors, but you keep all that's exciting to yourselves. Loo, darling! the Miss Harwoods' violets are always out earlier than any one else's. I have such a passion for violets! Do run out, dear, and see if you can find one for me yonder under the hedge."

"I will ask mamma to send you some to-morrow, Cousin Laura," said the determined little Loo.

"Did you ever hear anything like it?" said Miss Lydia, in a half whisper. "Loo!"

"Loo will carry this basket up-stairs for me to my room," said Miss Harwood, "and ask Harriet to show you the things in my cupboard, dear. All the prettiest things are there, and such a very grand cushion that I mean to make your mamma buy. Tell Harriet to show you everything; there's a darling! That is a very bright little girl, my dears," said the old lady, when Loo withdrew, reluctant but dutiful. "I hope nothing will ever be done to crush her spirit. I suppose you must have both come to tell us it's not true."

"Oh, you mean about my brother and Mary Clifford," cried out both sisters in a breath. "Oh, Miss Harwood, did you ever hear of such a thing! Did you ever know anything so dreadful! Tom, that might have married anybody!" cried Miss Lydia; "and Mary Clifford, that was so inconsolable, and pretended to have broken her heart!" cried the younger sister. They were both in a flutter of eagerness, neither permitting the other to speak.

"Oh dear, dear, it does come so hard upon us," said Miss Laura, "we that have always had such a prejudice against second mar-

riages; and a cousin's widow—it's almost like a brother; and if poor Harry could rise from his grave, what would he say!" concluded Miss Lydia, who took up the strain without any intervals of punctuation. "I begin to think it's all true the gentlemen say about women's inconstancy; that is, your common style of women," ran on the elder without any pause; "and poor dear Tom, who might have married any one," cried the younger, out of breath.

"Then I perceive," said Miss Amelia Harwood, "it's true? Well, I don't see much harm, for my part, if they have everything properly settled first. Poor Harry was all very well, I daresay, but he was a great fool not to provide for his children. Your brother said so at the time; but I did think, for my part, that Mary Clifford had the sense to know when she was well off."

"Oh, she shows that," cried Lydia Summerhayes, with a little toss of her head; "widows are so designing; they know the ways of men, and how to manage them, very differently from any of us—if *we* could stoop to such a thing, which, of course, we wouldn't. Oh, yes, Mary Clifford knows *very* well what she's

about. I am sure I have told Tom he was her honorary secretary for many a day. I thought she was just making use of him to serve her own purpose; I never thought how far her wiles went. If it had been her lawyer, or the curate, or any humble person; but Tom! He might have done so much better," said Laura, chiming in at some imperceptible point, so that it was impossible to tell where one voice ended and the other began.

"Well, I must say I am disappointed in Mary Clifford," said Miss Harwood, "she was always such an affectionate creature. That's why it is, I daresay. These affectionate people can't do without an object; but her five children"——

"Ah! yes, her five children," exclaimed the Miss Summerhayes; "only imagine dear Tom making such a marriage! Why, Charley Clifford has been at Eton ever so long: he is fifteen. And dear Tom is quite a young man, and might have married anybody," said the last of the two, taking up the chorus: "it is too dreadful to think of it—such a cutting blow to us."

"I can't see how it is so very bad for you," said Miss Amelia Harwood; "of course they

will live at Fontanel, and you will still keep the manor-house. I think it's rather a good thing for you, for my part. Hush! there's the child again—clever little thing—she knows quite well what we've been talking of. My dear, I hope Harriet showed you all the things—and isn't that a pretty cushion? Tell your mamma I mean to make her buy it, as she is the richest lady I know."

"Are you going, my dears?" said the elder old lady. "I am sorry you have so little time to stay—I hope you will find things arrange themselves comfortably, and that everybody will be happy. Don't get excited—it's astonishing how everything settles down. You want to speak to me, Loo," said Miss Harwood, starting a little when she had just reseated herself in her easy-chair, after dismissing her visitors. "Certainly, dear; I suppose you have set your little heart on one of the pretty pincushions up-stairs."

"No, indeed, nothing of the sort—I hope I know better than to care for such trumpery," said Loo, with an angry glow on her little pale face. "I stopped behind to say, that whatever mamma pleases to do, we mean to stand by her," cried poor Mary Clifford's only

champion. "I'm not sure whether I shall like it or not for myself—but we have made up our minds to stand by mamma, and so we will, as long as we live; and she shall do what she likes!" cried the little heroine. Two big tears were in those brown eyes, which looked twice as bright and as big through those great dew-drops which Loo would not for the world have allowed to fall. She opened her eyelids wider and wider to reabsorb the untimely tears, and looked full, with childish defiance, in Miss Harwood's face.

"Loo, you are a dear!" said prompt Miss Amelia, kissing the child. "You shall have the prettiest pincushion in all my basket." The little girl vanished suddenly after this speech, half in indignation at the promise, half because the tears would not be disposed of otherwise, and it was necessary to rush outside to conceal their dropping. "Ah! Amelia," said kind old Miss Harwood, "I'm sorry for poor Mary in my heart—but I'd rather have that child's love than Tom Summerhayes'."

"*Poor* Mary! for my part, I have no patience with her," said the practical Miss Amelia; "a woman come to her time of life

ought to have the sense to know when she's well off."

Such was the character of the comments made upon Mrs. Clifford's marriage when it was first talked of in Woodbine Cottage, and generally among all the female portion of society as it existed in Summerhayes.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT THE GENTLEMEN SAID.

The Rector of Summerhayes was the Miss Harwoods' brother, much younger, however, unmarried, and rather a fine man in his way. He had a little dinner, as it happened, the same evening. His table only held six, Mr. Harwood said. The rectory was an old-fashioned house, and the dining-room would have quite admitted a table which could dine twenty—but such were not the Rector's inclinations. There are enough men in the neighborhood of Summerhayes to make it very possible to vary your parties pleasantly when you

have a table that only holds six, whereas with a large number you can only have the same people over and over again; and Mr. Harwood did not like to be bored. He had a friend with him from town, as he always had on such occasions. He had his curate, and young Chesterfield from Dalton, and Major Aldborough, and Dr. Gossett; rather a village party—as he explaimed to Mr. Temple, the stranger—but not bad company. The dinner was a very good one, like all the Rector's little dinners, and was consumed with that judicious reticence in the way of talk, and wise suspension of wit, which is only practicable in a party composed of men. By means of this sensible quietness, the dinner was done full justice to, and the company expanded into full force over their wine. Then the conversation became animated. The Rector, it is true, indulged in ten minutes' parish talk with the Doctor, while Mr. Temple and Major Aldborough opened the first parallel of a political duel, and young Chesterfield discoursed on the last Meet to poor Mr. Spencer, who, reduced into curatehood and economy, still felt his mouth water over such forbidden pleasures. Then Mr. Harwood himself introduced the subject

which at that time reigned paramount over all other subjects at Summerhayes.

"So Tom Summerhayes is going to marry little Mrs. Clifford," said the Rector; "hadn't you heard of it? Yes, these grapes are from Fontanel. She has a capital gardener, and her conservatories are the finest in the county. A very pleasant little house altogether, though there are some particulars about her table which one feels to be feeble. Her dinners are always a little defective since poor Clifford's death—too mild, you know—too sweet—want the severer taste of a man."

"Mrs. Clifford—a pretty little woman with brown eyes?" said Mr. Temple. "I've met her somewhere. So she gives dinners, does she? When I saw her she was in the recluse line. I suppose that didn't last."

"It lasted quite long enough," said Dr. Gossett; "nothing could be more proper, or more ladylike, or more satisfactory in every way. If I had a wife and were unluckily to die, I should wish her just to wear her weeds and so forth like Mrs. Clifford—a charming woman; what should we do without her in the parish? but as for Tom Summerhayes"——

"He's an ass," growled the Major. "What's

he got to do burdening himself with other people's children. Why, there's five of 'em, sir! They'll hate him like poison—they'll think he's in no end of conspiracies to shut them out of their fortune. By Jove! if he knew as much about other people's children as I do. I've had two families consigned to me from India—as if I were a reformatory or a school-master, by Jove! *She's* all very well, as women go; but I wouldn't marry that family—no, not for *twenty*-five thousand a year."

"I confess I think it's a pity," said Mr. Spencer, playing with the Fontanel grapes. The Curate perhaps was thinking in his heart that such delicate little souvenirs might have gone quite as appropriately to his own little *ménage* as to the Rector's, who lacked for nothing. "It's like going into life at second hand, you know. I shouldn't like it for my part. The children are a drawback, to be sure; but that's not the greatest to my mind; they are nice enough children."

"Delightful children!" cried the Doctor, "little bricks! plucky little things! I don't care for babies, though they're partly my business. A family ready-made would just suit me."

"Well, it ain't much in my line to say what a fellow ought or oughtn't to do," said young Chesterfield. "I'm not a marrying man myself. I don't pretend to understand that sort of thing, you know. But Summerhayes ain't a spoon, as everybody will allow. He knows what he's doing. Last time I was at Fontanel, I couldn't make out for the life of me what Mrs. Clifford wanted with that new set of stables. She said they were preparing against Charley's growing up. I thought somehow Summerhayes must have a hand in it, and it's plain enough now."

"Well, he has done a great deal for her," said the Rector; "he's been a sort of unpaid steward at Fontanel. I daresay she didn't know how to reward him otherwise. I believe that's the handiest way of making it up to a man in a lady's fancy. It's a dangerous kind of business to go on long; but I don't know that there's anything to find fault with. She's pretty and he's not young;—well, not exactly a young fellow, I mean," said the Rector, with a half apology. "I daresay they'll do very well together. If poor Clifford had only made a sensible will—but for that nobody would have had any right to talk."

"And what was poor Clifford's will?" asked the stranger, with a polite yawn; "men don't generally study their wife's convenience in a second marriage, in that document; has the defunct been harder upon this lively lady than most husbands, or what's wrong about his will?"

"Deuced fool, sir!" cried the Major; "left her every farthing he had in the world, without settling a penny on those deuced children, or binding her up anyhow;—left her at thirty or so, I suppose, with every penny he had in her hands. Never heard of such an ass. Of course that's what Summerhayes means, but I can tell him it won't be a bed of roses. They'll hate him like poison, these brats will—they'll make parties against him—they'll serve him so that he'll be sick of his life. I know the whole business. He's well enough off now, with his old father's savings, and the manor-house, and nothing to do; but he'll be a wretched man, mark my word, if he marries Fontanel with five children in it. It's the maddest thing he ever did in his life."

"The poor lady doesn't seem to count for much," said Mr. Temple. "She's a pretty nobody, I suppose.

Upon which vehement disclaimers rose from all the *convives*. "No, she was a charming woman," Gossett said. "A dear, kind-hearted, good little soul," said the Rector. "Very well as women go," the Major admitted; while the two young men added warmer, but equally vague commendations. "Yet none of you imagine she is being married for herself," said the solitary individual who did not belong to Summerhayes, with a little laugh at the perturbation he had caused. But nobody saw the fun of it: they went on with the discussion, ignoring Mr. Temple.

"When a woman is in Mrs. Clifford's position," said the Doctor, "it is nonsense to talk of her *being* married. She is active, she is no longer passive in such a business. She's richer, she's *gooder*, she's handsomer, she's better off every way than Tom Summerhayes. How she ever came to fancy him is the wonder to me."

"Deuced nonsense," said the Major; "why didn't he marry off his sisters and set up snug for himself? He's old enough to know better, that fellow is. There's young Chesterfield there, he's at the time of life to make a fool of himself; but Summerhayes must be—let me see"——

"Don't let us go into chronology," said the Rector. "Poor little Mary, I hope she'll be happy all the same. I married her to poor Clifford, and I daresay I'll have this little business to do as well. I wish she had a brother, or an uncle, or some one to take that piece of duty off my hands. I think I will have one of my attacks, and go off to Malvern, and leave it, Spencer, to you."

"I wish she had an uncle or a brother for more than that," said the Doctor; "it ought to be seen to—the settlement and all that should be looked well into. I hope she'll have her wits about her. Not that I mean to ascribe any mean motives to Tom Summerhayes; but still when there's five children to be considered"——

"They'll kill him, sir," said the Major, with energy. "He'll not enjoy her money for long, mark my words; they'll kill him in a year. I have only got this to say, sir," continued the warrior, turning round upon Mr. Temple, who had ventured a remark not bearing on the present subject to the Curate, "if this income tax is going to be kept up without any compensation, I'll emigrate—it's the only thing that remains for honest Englishmen. After a life spent in the service of my country, I'll be

driven to a colony, sir, in my old age. It's more than the country can bear, and what's better, it's more than the country *will* bear. We'll have a revolution, by Jove! that's what will come of all this taxing and paying; it is not to be borne, sir, in a land that calls itself free."

Whereupon politics came into possession of the elders of the party, and young Chesterfield resumed that tantalizing account of the Meet which made the poor Curate sigh.

Poor Mrs. Clifford! she had but scant sympathy in those innumerable discussions, male and female, of which she was at present the subject, all in and about Summerhayes.

CHAPTER III.

WHAT THE CHILDREN HAD TO SAY.

Meanwhile, little Loo, with another pair of big tears in her brown eyes, had been driven home in the wintry twilight over the frosty road, which rang to every stamp of her

ponies' heels in a way which would have excited the little thing into positive enjoyment of the exhilarating sounds and sensations of rapid motion, had things been as usual. As it was, she sat wrapped up in a fur cloak, with her little veil over her face, watching the great trees glide past in the darkening, and turning her wistful looks now and then to the young winterly moon, which had strayed like a lost child into the midst of a whole covey of clouds, still crimsoned with reflections from the sunset. Loo's little heart ached so, and she was so steadfastly determined not to admit that it was aching, that she was almost glad to feel how chill her little feet were getting, and how benumbed the hand which was outside of the fur cloak. She kept her little, stiff fingers exposed to the frosty breeze all the same, and was rather glad of that sensation of misery which gave her a little excuse to herself for feeling unhappy. As the tinges of crimson stole out of the clouds, and the sky grew so wistfully, coldly clear around the moon, Fontanel came in sight, with lights in all its windows, twinkling through the trees in the long avenue, now one gleam, now another, as the little carriage drove on. There,

first of all, was the great nursery window, blazing with firelight, where Loo meant to hold a little committee as soon as she got in, and where she could so well picture "all of them" in all their different occupations, populating all the corners of the familiar room. A little further on it was the window of mamma's room, which lightened brightly out behind the bare branches of the great chestnut tree. What would the house be without mamma? the little girl asked herself, and the great blobs of hot dew in her eyes fell upon her cold fingers. "Aren't you well, Miss Loo?" asked the old groom who drove her, and Loo made him a very sharp answer in the irritation of her troubled little heart.

She ran into the light and comfort of the house with a perverse, childish misery which she did not understand. She would not let old William take her cloak from her, but threw it down, and stumbled over it, and stamped her little foot, and could have cried. Poor little Loo! she was sick at heart, and did not know what it meant. Instead of going to her mother, as she usually did, she hastened up to the nursery, where "all of them" were in a highly riotous condition at the moment,

and where the darkness of her little face was unnoted by all but nurse, who took off her boots and warmed her feet, and did away with the only physical reason Loo dared to pretend to as an excuse for looking wretched. It was not very easy to look wretched in that room. By the side of the fire, where a great log blazed, was Harry, aged ten, with a great book clasped in his arms, and his cheeks and hair equally scorched and crimsoned with near vicinity to the flame. Little Mary, and Alf, the baby, were playing at the other end of the room. Alf was six, though he was the baby; but Mrs. Clifford was the kind of woman to love a pet, and the little fellow's indignant manhood was still smothered in long curls and lace tuckers. He avenged himself by exercising the most odious tyranny over his next little sister, who was Baby's slave. All this little company Loo looked round upon with mysterious looks. She herself was twelve, little and pale, with nothing particular about her but her eyes, and her temper, which had already made itself, unfortunately, felt through the house. She sat maturing her plans till she heard the clock strike, and saw that it would shortly be time to go to her mo-

ther in her dressing-room, as the Fontanel children always did before dinner. She immediately bestirred herself to her task.

"Nurse," said Loo, "will you take these things down to mamma's dressing-room, please, and tell her we will all come presently, and if you wish to go down-stairs, you may. I will take care of the children, and take them down to mamma."

"Thank you, Miss Loo; but there's nobody to be at dinner but Mr. Summerhayes and Mademoiselle, and you're all to go down," said nurse; "you're too little to have the charge of Master Alf, and you've all got to be dressed, dears, for dessert."

"Then you can come up when I ring. I want the children by themselves," said little Loo, with her imperious air. "You can go away."

"You're a deal too forward for such a little thing. I'll speak to your ma, Miss, I will," said the offended nurse. "At least I would if it was any good; but as long as Missis encourages her like this—oh, children dear, there's changed times coming! You won't have the upper hand always; it's a comfort to a poor servant anyhow, whatever it may be

to other folks. I'm going, Miss Loo; and you'll come up directly the very minute you leave your ma to be dressed."

Loo watched her to the door, and, skipping off her chair, closed it behind the dethroned guardian of the nursery. "Now, children, come here, I want to speak to you all," said the little princess. "Mary, don't be as great a baby as Alf; you are eight—you are almost a woman. Alf, come here and stand by me like a gentleman. Harry"——

But Harry was not so easily roused. He had been lectured so long about scorching his face that he was now proof to all appeals. He had to be hunted up out of his corner, and the book skilfully tilted up and thrown out of his arms, which operation surprised Loo into a momentary laugh, of which she was much ashamed. "Harry!" she cried, with redoubled severity, "it is no nonsense I am going to talk of—it is something very serious. Oh, children!" exclaimed the elder sister, as Alf jumped upon Harry's back, and the two had a harmless scuffle in continuation of that assault which had roused Harry. "Oh, children!" cried Loo, who had laughed in spite of herself, now bursting into quick tears of impa-

tience and vexation. "You play and play and think of nothing else—and you won't let me talk to you of what's going to happen to mamma."

"What is it?" cried Harry, opening a pair of great bright eyes, and coming hastily to his sister's side. Alf asked "What is it?" too, and placed himself on the other hand. As for Mary, she was frightened and stood a little apart, ready to rush off to her mother, or to ring for Nurse, or to do anything else that the exigency might demand.

"Do you remember what mamma said to us when we were in the dining-room on Sunday after dinner, when Tom—I mean when Mr. Summerhayes was there—when he kissed us all?" said Loo, with a little red spot suddenly glowing out upon one indignant little cheek.

"She said he was going to be a father to us," said Harry, rather stolidly.

"And we didn't know what it meant," said little Mary, breaking in eagerly; "but Nurse told me afterwards. It means that mamma is going to be married to Cousin Tom. Oh, won't it be queer? Shall we have to call him papa, Loo? I shall never recollect, I am sure."

Loo gazed with eyes growing larger and larger in the face of her insensible sister. Then, seeing Mary's arm on the top of the great nursery fender, Loo, we are sorry to say, was so far betrayed by her resentment as to thrust little Mary violently away with a sob of passion. They all looked at her with wondering eyes.

"Oh, you stupid, stupid children!" cried the poor little heroine, "don't you know mamma, though she is so pretty, is not a young lady like other people that are going to be married; don't you know people talk about it, and laugh at her, and say she is foolish? I have heard them do it!" cried Loo. "I heard them in Summerhayes to-day talking and scolding about our mamma. She knows best what to do—better than all of them. She will never be unkind to us, or stop loving us. Oh, only think if she knew that people said such things—it would kill her! I heard them, and I thought I should have died. And now, children," said Loo, solemnly, "what we've got to do is to go down to mamma, not jumping or making a noise like great babies, but quiet and serious; and to tell her that she is to do what she

thinks best, and never mind what people say; and that we—we," sobbed the little girl, vainly trying to preserve her composure, as she brought out word after word with a gush of tears—"we'll stand by her and trust in her, and never believe anything. That is what we must go and say."

After she had finished her speech, Loo fell into a little passion of crying, in which she partly lost the slight murmurs and remonstrances of her calmer and wondering audience; but passion as usual carried the day. When Mrs. Clifford's bell rang the children went down-stairs, looking rather scared, in a kind of procession, Loo coming last with Alf, who had to be held tightly by the hand lest he should break out into gambols, and destroy all the solemnity of the proceeding. Mrs. Clifford was sitting by the fire when they went in, in an attitude of thought. The candles were not lighted, and it was very easy to suppose that mamma herself looked sad, and was quite in a state of mind to be thus addressed. Harry and Mary, rather ashamed of themselves, were already carrying on a quiet scuffle at the door when Loo came up to them. "You go first, Harry"—"No, you," they were saying to

each other. "Oh, you stupid, stupid children, you have no feeling!" cried Loo, bitterly, as she swept past them. Mrs. Clifford looked up with a smile, and held out her hand, which she expected to be grasped immediately by a crowd of little fingers, but the mother's looks were dreamy to-night, and some one else was before her children in her thoughts. She was startled when she felt Loo's little cold hand put into hers, and woke up and pushed her chair back from the fire to look at the little things who stood huddled together before her. "What is the matter?" said Mrs. Clifford.

"Oh, mamma, mamma," cried Loo; her poor little voice grew shrill, notwithstanding all her efforts. She had to make a pause, and to preserve her dignity had to let Alf go, who immediately went off to ride on the arm of the sofa, and compromise the seriousness of the scene. "Oh, mamma, dear," said Loo, feeling that no time was to be lost, "we have come to say that we will never believe anything; that we know you love us, and will always love us—and—and—we believe in *you;* oh, mamma, we believe in you, and we will always stand by you, if everybody in the world were on the other side."

Here Loo fell, choking with tears and passion, on her mother's foot-stool, and laid her poor little head, which ached with cold and crying, on Mrs. Clifford's lap. The mother's eyes had woke up out of all their dreaming. Perhaps it was as well the candles were not lighted. That cheek which the widow screened with her hand was as crimson and as hot as Harry's had been reading over the fire. She was glad Loo's keen eyes were hidden upon her lap; she blushed, poor tender woman as she was, before her children. The little woman-daughter was dreadful to her mother at the moment—a little female judge, endued with all the awfulness of nature, shaming the new love in her mature heart.

"What does this all mean, children?" said Mrs. Clifford, trying to be a little angry, to conceal the shock she had received.

"Oh, please, mamma, it's Loo," cried Mary, frightened. "She made us come; it is one of her passions."

"No, it was not one of her passions," said Harry, who was Loo's champion; "it was to tell mamma we would always stand by her; and so I will," cried the boy on his own account, kindling up, "if there were any rob-

bers or anything—for I'm the eldest son when Charley's at school."

Loo heard this where she lay, with her head on her mother's lap; she was incapable of speech or motion almost, but she could not but groan with impatience over the stupidity of the children; and Alf was riding loudly on the arm of the sofa, shouting to his imaginary horse. Loo gathered herself up with a blush upon her cheeks; it did not enter into her head to imagine that her mother blushed much more hotly and violently when the little face unfolded itself slowly out of her lap.

"Hush! Loo, don't say any more," said Mrs. Clifford; then with a little effort the mother put her arm round the child and drew her close. "I understand what you mean—but you must not say any more," she said; then she stooped down her hot cheek upon that wet one of poor Loo's. "We shall all be very happy, I hope," said Mrs. Clifford in the dark, in her little daughter's ear. "I am doing it—for—for all your sakes, dear. He will stand by you and me, and all of us, Loo. I hope we shall be—very happy—happier even than we are now," said Mrs. Clifford, with a faint little tremble in her voice and quiver at

her heart. When she had kissed Loo, and the child had gone away to compose herself, poor Mary, the mother, sat for a long time looking into the fire with a terrible misgiving upon her—"happier even than we are now." Ah! just then she had been so happy—all well in the prosperous, plentiful house; not an ache or a trouble that she knew of among all her children; not a single look of love dimmed to her yet by her resolution; and the new love, sweet as any girl's dream, restoring to her firmament all the transitory delicious lights of youth. Somehow that prospect darkened under a strange cloud of alarm and shame when the mother felt her cheeks flush at the look of her woman-child. "I am doing it for—all their sakes," she tried to say to herself; but her innocence grew like guilt as she felt in her heart that this pretence was not true.

CHAPTER IV.

HER OWN THOUGHTS.

Mrs. Clifford had not much time to think that night, and the impression went off her

when she was in her lover's company—which was very nearly always; for, long before this had been thought of, Tom Summerhayes had been the soul of everything at Fontanel. She had come so gradually to consult him about everything—to take his counsel upon small and great that happened—that it seemed only natural now that he should belong to her; but after Loo's little scene a variety of annoyances came upon Mary—indications of the world's opinion—evidences that it did not seem so natural to other people as to herself. Even Charley's school-boy letter was rather dreadful to his mother. The boy bestowed his approbation upon her match, and was to stand by her, too, in Loo's very vein; and the mother felt more humbled by thus obtaining the consent of her children than she would have been by the sacrifice of all she had in the world. Still it never came into her head to give up her marriage—never, perhaps, till a day or two before, when things were much too far advanced for any drawing back, and when she sat alone by her fire, with her desk open before her, late at night when all the household were asleep. In her desk were various little matters which had been treasures to Mary

Clifford. She took them out with trembling hands—a withered flower, given to her, oh, so long ago, when she was little more than a child, and preserved with girlish romance; a little ring made of hair, which she had worn in her days of betrothal; a little faded drawing, made by herself at the same period, of her early lover; and last and most important of all, some letters—not many, but very tender—the love-letters of her youth. How she had cried over them many a sad day after her Harry died; how she had gradually forgotten them again and left them in their safe concealment; how of late she had rather avoided the place where they were, and shrank from touching the little desk that contained them; and now, at last, upon the eve of her second wedding, here they were all spread out before her, to be disposed of somehow. Mary's treasures! she had heard them called so—had called them so herself. What were they now!

Poor, little, soft, tender-hearted woman! There was no passion in her. She was in love with all her heart, but it was affectionately, not passionately, or else she never could have opened that desk. She took out the flower,

and cried, and looked at it; then, with a hasty impulse, put it softly on the fire, and watched it blaze into sudden ashes, and cried again, and felt guilty to her heart. "I was such a child," she said to herself in her tears, and took a kind of melancholy comfort from thinking how young she had been when she was first a bride. Then she looked at her own drawing, which was not the least like him, and thought with compunction of her Harry. Poor Harry! All this bright house, all these dear children, were his as well as hers; but he was put away in the family vault, poor fellow, and nothing was henceforth to belong to him in this living world—not even the name he had given her, not her thoughts, not any of her heart. She cried over that too like the rest. She put up the ring in a little parcel for Loo—she laid aside the portrait for little Harry. She tried to indemnify him by making over all those little mementoes, which it troubled her to look at, to his children. Then she took up the bundle of yellow letters and timidly opened one of them, and read a few sentences. There she read of the young love that was never to die, never to know change. Poor Mary put them away again

with a sob almost of terror, and hastily locked up the desk, and resolved to put it away somewhere out of sight. She could not examine any further into those "treasures" which had become ghosts. She drew her chair to the fire, and shivered in her thoughts. She was a simple-minded woman, not wise, but moved by every wind of feeling. It came to her mind just then to recollect how, in her first widowhood, she had taken comfort from the thought that Harry was near and saw her tears for him, and knew how faithful her poor heart was. Now that thought was too much for Mary's strength. She gave a cry of helpless terror when it occurred to her. Alas for that immortality of union which comforts the heart of grief! What if Harry met her at the very gates of heaven when she got there, and claimed her, she who was going to be another man's bride? Sitting alone in the night, with all the household asleep, and such thoughts for companions, it was not wonderful if a panic seized upon Mrs. Clifford's heart. Poor Harry, who had loved her so well, appeared like a pursuing spectre to the soft little woman. If it was true that she belonged to him for ever and ever, how could she dare to love

Tom Summerhayes? and if she did not belong to him for ever and ever—he who had loved her to the end, and had never done anything to forfeit her affection—what was the hereafter, the heaven where love, it appeared, could not be immortal? These fancies wrung poor Mary's heart. She did not know any answer to make to them. The question put by the Sadducees nohow answered her case. She who blushed before her children, how could she ever look Harry in the face? She felt herself an infidel, trembling and crying over that everlastingness which had once given her such consolation. That Harry could ever cease to love her, nature contradicted as impossible. He was in heaven, far off, unseen, fixed in solemn unchangeableness in all the elevation of love and grief he died in, never to alter; and she?—— Step by step unconsciously that elevation of grief and love had died away from her in the changing human days, and now here she sat weeping, trembling, thinking with awe of Harry, wondering how he would claim her hereafter, how she could dare name his name when she was another man's wife. Poor little trembling soul! She stole away to bed when she could bear it

no longer, and sought refuge in sleep with the tears still in her eyes, some grand and desperate resolution of making a sacrifice of herself being in her mind, as was natural. She had troubled dreams, and woke up quite unrefreshed in the morning, which was very unlucky that day of all others, because the lawyers were coming, and all her business affairs were to be settled before her marriage. However, Mrs. Clifford could not remember at her first waking what it was which had thrown such a cloud upon her; and when her thoughts of the previous night did return to her mind, they were neither so intolerable nor so urgent as they had been. In the daylight, somehow, those gates of heaven, at which Harry might be standing to claim her, looked a very far way off to the bride of Tom Summerhayes—there was no such immediate certainty of Harry's existence anyhow, or of the kind of interest he might take in her proceedings; and the philosophy of the question did not recur to her mind with those puzzling and hopeless speculations. She was a great deal more content to accept the present and to postpone the future—to let hereafter take care of itself—than she had been at night. She

put away the desk with Harry's letters in a dark vacant upper shelf of a bookcase in her own dressing-room; there, where she could not even see it, it would no longer witness against her.

It was a sunny morning, and the children came in, all fresh and rosy, to say their prayers, and there was a note from Mr. Summerhayes on the breakfast-table, naming the hour at which the law people were to arrive. Mrs. Clifford had recovered her color and her spirits before they came; she was a little agitated, and looked very pretty in the commotion of her heart. Hers was a position very peculiar and interesting, as Mr. Gateshead himself, the old family solicitor, suggested, as he read over the deed she was to sign. He was perfectly pleased with the arrangements altogether, and said that Mr. Summerhayes had behaved most honorably and in the most gentlemanly way. It was very clear that *his* motives were not mercenary. The deed Mrs. Clifford had to sign was one by which Fontanel and all its dependencies was settled upon her eldest son, she retaining the life-interest in it which her husband had meant her to have. Mr. Summerhayes, who had been brought up for the

bar, had himself advised Mr. Gateshead in the drawing up of this important document. The new bridegroom was anxiously solicitous that the children should be portioned and the property distributed exactly as the family agent, who knew poor Clifford's mind, would have advised him to settle it; and the deed was irrevocable and framed in the most careful manner, so that no ingenuity of the law could make it assailable hereafter. It was so rigid in all its provisions that poor Mary wavered a little over it. She thought it scarcely fair that *he* should be shut out entirely from every interest in all this wealth, which, at the present moment, belonged absolutely to herself. It was Mr. Summerhayes himself who put, with a certain gentle force, the pen into her hands, and pointed exactly to the spot where she was to sign. "I have *you*, Mary," he said in her ear, as he leant over her to keep the parchment steady; and Mary Clifford signed away all her power and secured her children's rights, with "a smile on her lip and a tear in her eye," feeling to her heart the delicious flattery. What she possessed was nothing to him—he had *her*, and a kingdom could not make him happier. So said the tone of his

whisper, the glance of his eye, and the echo of her heart. This living Love which stood by her side, securing so carefully that Harry Clifford's wealth should go to Harry Clifford's heirs, and seeking only herself for its own, completely swallowed up poor Clifford's ghost, if that forlorn spirit might by chance be cognisant of what was passing. Mary remembered no more her qualms and misgivings; and the prospect before her—now that the very children had got used to it, had ceased either to oppose or to stand by her, and had fallen into natural excitement about the approaching festivities, the guests who were to be at Fontanel, the new dresses, the great event about to happen—looked as bright as the glowing day.

CHAPTER V

THE MARRIAGE.

Fontanel received a considerable party of guests for the marriage. Miss Laura and Miss Lydia, who were to be at the head of

affairs while the new Mrs. Summerhayes was absent on her wedding tour, arrived two days before, that they might get into the ways of the place, and know what was required of them, which was not very much, for Mary was but a languid housekeeper. Then there were two aunts, an uncle, and some cousins of Mrs. Clifford, none of whom in the least approved of the match, though decorum and curiosity and kindness prompted them to countenance poor Mary in her foolishness, notwithstanding their general surprise, like Miss Harwood, that she had not the sense to know when she was well off. Then there was Charley from Eton, who had grown so much lately, that his mother blushed more than ever when he kissed her and said something kind about her marriage. These were not pleasant days for poor Mrs. Clifford. She knew in her heart that nobody particularly approved of her, not even Tom's sisters—that people were saying it was just what was to be expected, and that a woman left at her age with so much property in her hands was sure to make a fool of herself. She knew that the ladies when they got together had little conversations over her—that one won-

dered why she could not make herself happy with these dear children, and another with this fine place—and that a third mused what poor Mr. Clifford would have said could he have known. Poor Mary was very thankful when the day dawned on her wedding-morning—she was glad, as brides seldom are, of the arrival of the fated moment which was to place things beyond the reach of censure or criticism, and relieve her from her purgatory. The Rector of Summerhayes had not been called on to do that piece of duty. The bridegroom luckily had a friend whose privilege it was; and still more luckily there was a little old disused church within the grounds of Fontanel in which the ceremony was to be performed, without the necessity of encountering the gaze and remarks of the village. It was not intended to be a pretty wedding, or to put on those colors of joy which become the espousals of youth.

Mingled and complicated, as are the thoughts of middle age, were the feelings of the two who stood side by side before the bare rural altar. The bridegroom was slight and tall in figure, with a careless, languid air, through which occasionally a little gleam of

excitement sparkled. If you watched him closely you could see that his mind was no way absorbed in the ceremonial of his marriage. The quick, sudden glance here and there under his eyelids, of those cold but clear grey eyes, turned inquiringly to everything within his range. He read in the looks of the clergyman, even while he pronounced the nuptial blessing, what was his opinion of the entire transaction. He penetrated the mask of propriety in which the bride's relations concealed their feelings—he investigated with oft-repeated momentary glances the face of Charley, who stood in his Etonian certainty of manhood, premature but not precocious, near his mother's side. Mr. Summerhayes even scanned, when all was over, the downcast countenance of Loo, who stood behind, watching with stout endurance, and resolute not to cry during the entire ceremony. What was the meaning which lay in those quick, furtive darts of the bridegroom's eye it was impossible to say; his closest friend could not have elucidated this strange secret by-play, of which nobody in the company was conscious except, perhaps, one child; but one thing it proved at any rate, that his heart at this special mo-

ment was not engrossed, to the exclusion of everything else, by his bride.

Mary was much less mistress of herself. She cried quietly under her veil as she stood and listened to the familiar words. She repeated those that fell to her with a little shiver. In her heart she could not but feel what a terrible act she was completing as she vowed her love and obedience over again, and separated her future from her past. But Mary, with her downcast eyes, was insensible to everybody's opinion at that moment. Had she been standing in a wilderness she could not have felt more isolated. She was conscious only of her new husband by her side—of an indistinct figure before her—of God above and around, a kind of awful shadow looking on. Mr. Summerhayes was aware of her tears, and they moved him so that his color heightened involuntarily, and he pressed her hand with a warning pressure when it came to that part of the ceremony. But Mary herself was not aware that she was crying till she felt this touch of remonstrance, which startled her back into consciousness. Such was this marriage, at which, as at other marriages, people looked on with various

shades of sympathy and criticism, and which, with all its concealed terrors and outward rejoicing, was the free act of hearts uncoerced and acting only at their own pleasure—a free act, suggested by no third party, unless, perhaps, it might happen to be a certain grim inflexible Fate, who, if the reins are but yielded to her for a moment, pursues her victim through a throng of inevitable consequences. But perhaps, when a woman is being married like Mary Clifford, it is a kind of comfort to her to feel as if she could not help herself, rather than to know that she is entering all these new dangers voluntarily, and in obedience to nobody's will but her own.

"Well, I am sure, I wish them every comfort in life," said Miss Harwood, as she stood leaning on her brother's arm at the hall door of Fontanel, watching the carriage drive off which contained the happy pair. "She can't feel much like a bride, poor thing, leaving all these children behind her. I am sure I wish her every happiness. I hope she'll never live to repent it," said Miss Harwood, with a sigh.

"Don't be spiteful," said the Rector. "This is not a time for such ill-omened wishes. It's a very suitable match, and I wish them joy."

"Oh, Mr. Harwood," said Miss Laura, taking up her position at the Rector's other side, thus effecting a natural separation from Mary's relations, who were comparing sentiments a little apart from the Summerhayes' party—"a suitable match! when dear Tom is well known to represent the oldest family in the county, and might have married anybody—not to say a word against dear Mary, who is our sister now, and such a sweet creature. But oh, Mr. Harwood," cried Miss Lydia, who had interposed, as usual, "to talk of a suitable match!"

"There are no suitable matches now-a-days. I don't believe on 'em, by Jove!" said Major Aldborough, who, with eyes slightly reddened by champagne, was watching the carriage just then disappearing down the avenue.

"But there might be, Major," said Miss Lydia, so softly that her sister could not take up the meek remark.

The Major only answered, "By Jove!" under his breath. He was startled by the close vicinity—the gentle look—the mild suggestion. He moved a little away in a momentary panic. There was never any telling, as he said to himself, what these women might mean.

"It is so strange to be left in charge of the house," said Miss Laura, "it gives one such a funny feeling. I don't know how in the world we shall do with all the responsibility; but dear Mary insisted upon it, you know—though I am sure Mrs. Tansey would have been much more suitable for the head of the table than one of us, who are so inexperienced," cried Miss Lydia; "but dear Mary thought it best for the children's sake. I hope, dear Mrs. Tansey, you don't mind being our guest," proceeded the sisterly duet; "dear Mary thought it of such importance that the children should get used to us—though they know us perfectly well, still things are all so different; though otherwise, of course, she would so much have preferred you."

"Oh, pray, don't think it necessary to apologise for my niece to me, Miss Summerhayes," said the offended aunt. "Mary has consulted her own inclinations, and so long as she is happy, that is all *we* can *possibly* want of her. I think she is *quite* right to make friends, if she can, in her new family. She knows she can always calculate upon *us* if she ever wants any service," added the bride's relation, with a slight heightening of color and the ghost of

a curtsy. The Miss Summerhayes were not unequal to the emergency.

"We all know how much poor dear Mary is liked among her own friends," cried Miss Lydia. "Your dear girls were so fond of her last year when they spent such a long time at Fontanel; and dear Mary has such a taste in presents," said Miss Laura, coming in so eagerly that she began out of breath. "We have gone shopping with her often when she was buying her little souvenirs. I hope you don't think it will make any difference now she is married again. She is *so* affectionate; but as for wanting services from anybody, that is very unlikely," resumed the elder sister, "now she has dear Tom. Dear Tom is so very devoted," said Miss Laura, breaking in headlong. "You would think she was only eighteen to see all the attention he pays her. It is quite sweet to see them, like two turtle-doves."

Such being the conversation that succeeded immediately upon the departure of the bridal pair, it is not to be supposed that the dinner-table was spread with a very joyful feast, or that the evening was spent in much happiness. Mary's relations, who had up to this

time felt themselves much at ease at Fontanel, kept greatly by themselves during the remainder of the wedding-day. Their occasional minglings with the Summerhayes' party called forth bursts of smart dialogue, more exciting than amiable, and the opposing sides contended much for the notice of Loo and the other children, when they came down-stairs in their new dresses after dinner. It made little Loo's heart sick to feel herself enfolded in the embraces of Miss Lydia and Laura on one side, and then to be talked to and admonished by Aunt Tansey on the other, who hoped she would be a good girl, and a great comfort to her poor mother. The children could not tell what to make of the aspect of affairs. Mamma gone, who was the sun and centre of the domestic world, and already a new rule and vague possibilities of change in the startled house. Down-stairs among the servants, though the means of merry-making were plentiful, this threatening cloud was even more apparent. A new master, known to like "his own way," was an alarming shadow impending over the little community hitherto mildly and liberally governed by the mistress, whom her servants could scarcely

forgive for the step she had taken. "With five lovely children and every blessin' as this world could afford," as the housekeeper said, shaking her troubled head. The new husband by no means ranked among the blessings of Providence to the mistress of Fontanel in anybody's judgment, and nowhere was Mary's rash act resented more warmly than in the servants' hall.

"But, Loo," said Etonian Charley, next morning, when Aunt Tansey and all her belongings had left Fontanel, and everything had fallen under the restless sway of the Miss Summerhayes, "I'm not going to put up with all this. You said we were to stand up for mamma; you mean we are only to pretend to stand up for mamma, you little humbug. Now that's not my meaning," said the heir of Fontanel. "I'm not going to make-believe that I think she's done right, when I don't. I am going to swallow Cousin Tom right out," cried the boy, not without a little flush on his face. "It's a little awkward, to be sure, to know what to call him—but look here, Loo—I mean to stand by my mother without any humbug. I mean to think she's done the very best for us all, and for herself too; and if she

don't think the same when she comes back, I'll try to make her; and if you look black, as you're looking, you are not the little brick I took you for, and I won't have anything more to do with you, Loo."

"Oh, Charley, I am not half so good as you are," cried the admiring little sister, looking up to him with tearful eyes. Charley's resolution acted like a charm upon the house in general; and so, with a gradually improving temper, though much pressed and fretted by Miss Laura and Miss Lydia, the nursery and the servants' hall, and all the dependencies of Fontanel, waited for the advent of the new master and the return of Mrs. Summerhayes.

PART II.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RESULT.

When the newly married people returned home, after an absence of about two months, the new rule soon but gradually made itself felt at Fontanel. Though Mr. Summerhayes had for a long time been the inspiring influence there, there was still all the difference between his will as interpreted by Mrs. Clifford and his will as accomplished by himself. Of the two, it must be allowed that the retainers of the family preferred the cordial, kind, inconsistent sway of poor Mary to the firm and steady government of her new husband; and then everybody had acknowledged her right to rule, which came by nature, while every soul secretly rebelled against his, which was a kind of contradiction to nature. Mr. Summerhayes' path was

not strewn with roses when he came back to Fontanel; then, for the first time, he had the worst of it. After she was fairly married, and everything concluded beyond the possibility of change, Mary, like a true woman, had found it quite possible to forget all her previous doubts and difficulties, and to conclude, with that simple philosophy which carries women of her class through so many troubles, that now everything must come right. It was no embarrassing new affection now, but acknowledged duty, that bound her to her husband, and she would not contemplate the possibility of this duty clashing with her former duties. So she came home, having fully regained the composure of her mind, very happy to see her children again, and utterly forgetting that they had not yet become accustomed, as she had, to look upon "Cousin Tom" as the head of the house. But it was now that gentleman's turn to suffer the pains and penalties of the new position which he had taken upon himself. He was fully conscious of all the troubled sidelong glances out of Loo's brown eyes; and when Charley burst into the house in schoolboy exuberance at Easter, for his few

days of holiday, Mr. Summerhayes noted the gulp in the throat of the Etonian, when he found it necessary to ask the new master of the house about something hitherto settled between himself and the old groom, with perhaps a reference to the indulgent mother, who could never bear to deprive her boy of any pleasure. Mr. Summerhayes let Charley have his will with the best grace in the world, but still saw and remarked that knot of discontent in the boy's throat—that apple of Adam, which Charley swallowed, consciously, yet, as he himself thought, unobserved by any man. The younger children were perhaps still more difficult to deal with; for it was hard to teach them that Mr. Summerhayes was no longer Cousin Tom, to be romped with, but that it was necessary to be quiet and good, and not to disturb the meditations of the head of the house. True, it fell to Mary's lot to impress this fact upon the rebellious consciousness of Harry and little Alf; but Mr. Summerhayes, who, at that particular period of his life, was all eyes and ears, and missed nothing, did not fail to have the benefit. Then some of the servants were petulant—some were insolent, presuming on

their old favor with their mistress—some re signed altogether when they knew "how things was agoing to be;" the most part sneaked and gave in, with secret reflections, every one of which was guessed and aggravated by the new master. It is easy to see that his position had its difficulties and disagreeables; but to do Mr. Summerhayes justice, he behaved with great temper and forbearance in this troublesome crisis. He made it apparent to everybody that he was not to be trifled with; but at the same time, pretended not to see the little petulancies which were in reality so distinctly apparent to him, and which galled him so much. He swallowed many a mortification just then more bitter and stinging than Charley's soon-forgotten gulp of boyish pride; and steadily and gradually, without any one knowing much about it, the new master of Fontanel won the day.

He was a man whose previous life had, to a considerable extent, belied his real character. He had lived idly and without any apparent ambition during these forty years, contenting himself, apparently, for the last ten, with his dreary old manor-house and spare income.

But this was not because he was of a light and easy temper, or satisfied with his lot. He was active enough in reality, now that he had affairs in his hands of sufficient magnitude to occupy him—and thoughtful enough to keep his purposes locked in his own heart, from which they came forth in act and deed, only when full fledged and ready for the gaze of the world. The house of Fontanel gradually recognized the hand of the master. Without any visible coercion upon Mary, the open, liberal, hospitable house came by imperceptible degrees under that stern regime which had made life possible at the manor-house upon the much diminished means of the Summerhayes'. The process was like nothing so much as the change of a ship's course in a stormy sea. The vessel wavered, reeled for a moment as the helm went round in the new direction, but next minute had righted herself, and was ploughing steadily on her new course, leaving the ignorant passengers below in total unconsciousness of anything that had happened except that momentary stagger and uncertainty which it was so easy to account for. Mary was not cut down either in her hospitalities or charities—or at least, if she was,

she did not know it; but before a year had elapsed, the expenditure in Fontanel house was smaller, and the expenditure on Fontanel estate greater than it had ever been in the memory of man. Mr. Summerhayes was an enterprising and enlightened landlord. He took up the Home Farm with such energy that every tenant-farmer within twenty miles learned, or ought to have learned, the salutary lesson; and he gave loans and bonuses upon improvement, such as suggested to the unimproving sundry sarcasms as to the facility with which men parted with other people's money. If it had been his own, instead of belonging to his wife and her children, it would have made a difference, people said; but then it was only the unprogressive, whom Mr. Summerhayes decidedly snubbed and disapproved of, who made that ill-natured remark. To tell the truth, however, when he set out upon this active career, which was so unlike his former life, Mr. Summerhayes of Fontanel became much less popular in the county than the poor squire at the manor had been in old days. Perhaps, in the change from poverty to wealth, he carried things with too high a hand. Perhaps he failed to

recognise his own position as an interloper, and acted the master too completely to please the popular fancy. At all events, nobody was satisfied—not even his sisters in the old house, which they had all to themselves; certainly not the little community in his present home, which obeyed and feared and suspected him—perhaps not even his wife.

Mary had a woman's usual experience before she married her second husband and made this complication of affairs. She knew as a certainty, what all the younger brides have to learn by hard personal training, that the husband must be different from the lover; that the habits of ordinary life will return after a while; and that the wife's happiness must be of a different kind, if she is happy at all, from that of the bride, to whose pleasure, for the moment, everything defers by a tender fallacy and sophism of nature. But somehow, in its own case, the heart is always incredulous. To marry him had, after all, caused this soft woman a great many natural pangs, and it was hard to find so soon all the affectionate conferences and consultations, by means of which he had at first won her, ceasing altogether, and to feel that the affairs

which she had managed so long were now in inexorable hands, and ruled by plans which were only communicated to her when they were ready for execution, if even then. Then poor Mary, who had always been looked on with indulgent eyes, began to feel herself under a sterner regard, and to see that her acts and words were judged solely on their own merits, and not with any softening glamour of love, making everything beautiful because it was she. It is impossible to describe how nervous and unsteady this consciousness made her, and how much more ready she was to make mistakes, from knowing that her mistakes would not be excused, or looked upon affectionately as wisdom in disguise. Poor soul! he was very kind to her at the same time; but his eye was on when she caressed her children; his quick ear somehow caught the little secrets they whispered to her in that sacred twilight hour, in her dressing-room before dinner, where Mr. Summerhayes had now acquired the habit of coming in to talk with his wife, and finding the children in the way. When they were all sent off on such occasions, it was well for Loo that she generally headed the retreat, before the new master

lighted his wife's candles, and threw an intrusive glare into the sacred atmosphere. Loo was a heroine, but she had a temper. But as for poor Mary, to see her disappointed children trooping away, and to guess with quick instinct the thoughts that were already rising in their little angry hearts, and to lose that sweet moment in which her soul was *retrempé* and made strong, was very bitter even to her yielding temper and loving heart. She could have cried but for fear of her husband; and many a time had bitter drops in her eyes, which had to be crushed back somehow, and re-absorbed into her breast, when those tell-tale candles flashed their unwelcome light upon her. Yet, notwithstanding all this, she had no right nor wish to call herself an unhappy wife. He *was* very kind to her—seemed as though he loved her, which makes up to a woman for a great many things; but still a sense of having overturned the world somehow, and disturbed the course of nature—of having introduced bewilderment and confusion, she could not tell how, and a false state of affairs—combined, with a certain ache of disappointment, of wounded pride, and unappreciated confidence, to make poor

Mary's musings weary and troubled, and to plant thorns in her pillow.

Thus it happened that nobody was pleased with the change which had taken place at Fontanel, except, perhaps, Mr. Summerhayes himself, who seemed sufficiently contented with all that he had done and was doing. Certainly he devoted himself to the improvement of the estate. Such crops had never been dreamt of in the county as those that began to be usual upon the well-tilled acres of the Home Farm; and when leases fell in, the lumbering old tenants had no chance against the thriving agriculturists whom the King-Consort brought in over their heads at advancing rents, to the benefit of the rent-roll and the country, though not without some individual misery at the same time to lessen the advantage. Some old people emigrated, and got their death by it; some hopeful farmer-families dispersed and were broken up, and found but a checkered fortune awaiting them in a cold world, outside of those familiar fields which they had believed themselves born to cultivate, and almost thought their own; and Mrs. Summerhayes had red eyes after these occurrences, and took to

headaches, which were most unusual to her; but it was unquestionably the most enlightened policy—it was very good for the land and the country and things in general; and, in particular, there could not be any doubt it was good for the rent-roll of Fontanel.

CHAPTER VII.

THE NEXT EVENT IN THE FAMILY.

"I WONDER whether Charley Clifford's coming of age will be kept as it ought to be," said Miss Amelia Harwood, meditatively. It was more than five years since the marriage, but there was still going to be a bazaar at Summerhayes; and still a large basket stood on the drawing-room table at Woodbine Cottage, full of embroidered cushions, babies' socks, children's pinafores, and needle-books and pen-wipers without number, upon which Miss Amelia was stitching little tickets which told the price. "To give him all his honors will be ticklish work for Tom Summerhayes, and

to withhold them won't answer with a boy of spirit like Charley. I am fond of that boy. He behaves very well to his mother; though really, when a woman makes a fool of herself, I don't wonder if her children get disgusted. I should like to know what she thinks of her exploit now. I always foresaw she would see her folly as the children grew up."

"Oh, hush, Amelia," said her elder sister; "don't be hard upon poor dear Mary now. I was surprised at the time—but of course she must have been in love with him; and it was hard, you know, to be left all alone at her time of life. She is quite a young woman now."

"She is ——," said Miss Amelia, pausing, with inexorable memory and a host of dates at her finger-ends, "either forty-two or forty-three. I don't quite recollect whether she was born in '14 or in '15. Now that I think, it was '14, for it was before the Waterloo year, which we had all such good cause to remember; and as for being left all alone, she had her children, and I always said she ought to have had the sense to know when she was well off. However, that is not the question. I want to know whether they will make any ado over Charley's coming of age."

"Poor boy!—it is sad for him having no father to advise him at such an important time of his life," said gentle Miss Harwood, with a sigh.

"Oh, stuff!" said Miss Amelia. "Harry Clifford, poor fellow, never was wise enough to direct himself, and how could he have guided his son? I dare say Tom Summerhayes would be a better adviser, if you come to that. But I am sorry for Charley all the same; he's the heir, and yet somehow he doesn't seem the heir. His mother, after all, *is* still a young woman, as you say, and Tom Summerhayes seems to have got everything so secure in his hands that one can't help feeling something is sure to happen to make the estate his in the end. It can't be, I suppose; they said the deeds were irrevocable, and that Mary couldn't alter them if she wished, which I don't suppose she does;—she loves her children, I must say that for her. Still one never feels sure with a man like Tom Summerhayes; and poor Charley has no more to do with his own affairs than if he were a little ploughboy on Mr. Summerhayes' estate."

"Hush, my dear," said Miss Harwood, who was in her summer chair, which commanded,

through the openings of the green blind, a view of the village green and the road before the door—"here are Louisa and Lydia coming to call—and out of breath, too; so they must have some news or something particular to say."

"About Charley's coming of age, of course," said Miss Amelia. "I daresay Mary and Tom have had a fight over it, and he's judged it as well for once to let Mary have her way. He always had a great deal of sense, had Tom Summerhayes."

"Oh, I declare, to see how far the Miss Harwoods are on with their things!" cried Miss Louisa Summerhayes, almost before she had entered the room; "but you are always in such good time, Miss Amelia. As for us, we have such a great deal to think about just now, it drives the bazaar out of our heads; almost as bad as if we had a family ourselves," said Miss Lydia, with a breathless outburst. "I daresay you have heard the news—you who always hear everything from Fontanel."

"About Charley's birthday?" said Miss Amelia.

"Well, upon my word, you are a witch of Endor, or something," said Miss Lydia, whose

turn it was to begin the duet; "for dear Tom rode down to tell us only this morning. He is so considerate, dear Tom; and I am sure there never was such a stepfather—to think of all he means to do, just as if Charley was his own son and heir," cried Miss Louisa, who was scarcely able to keep in time for want of breath.

"His own son and heir, if he had one, need not to make so much commotion, my dears," said Miss Amelia, administering with great goodwill a friendly snub; "there is a difference, you know, between Fontanel and the manor-house. I suppose there will be a dinner of the tenantry, and all that. There couldn't, you know, much as your family is respected in the county, be much of that sort of thing at Summerhayes."

"My dear, you know Amelia always speaks her mind," said Miss Harwood; "you don't mind what she says! I am sure I hope poor Charley will have a good day for his *fête*, and that everything will go off well. I daresay they will all feel a little strange on such a day, to think of all the changes that have happened. I remember, as if it were yesterday, the day he was born; and oh, how happy poor Mary was!"

"I am sure she ought to be a great deal happier now," said Miss Laura, with a toss of her head, "if she were sensible enough to see her advantages. Dear Tom makes himself a slave to her, and spends all his strength upon the estate; and then never to get any thanks for it. I declare, to hear how you speak is enough to make one hate the world," said Miss Lydia, with the usual joint disregard of punctuation. "But, Miss Harwood, you always take Mary's side."

"I didn't know that we were come so far as to take sides," said Miss Amelia, dryly; "Mary never takes her own side, that's clear. She tries to please everybody, poor soul; to make her husband happy by letting him suppose himself the master of Fontanel—and to make her son happy by making believe he's all right and in his natural place; and what's to come of it all after Charley comes of age is more than I can tell; for Charley's a boy of spirit, though he's devoted to his mother, and it's hard never to have anything to say in one's own affairs. A woman may submit to it, perhaps, but a young man is very different," said Miss Amelia, with great gravity, breaking off with an emphatic jerk the last end of her thread.

Both the sisters were in tears before this speech was finished. "I am sure it is very hard," sobbed the elder, as soon as she could speak, "to be in dear Tom's position, and to hear to manage everything, and always to have it brought up against him that he has nothing to do with the estate, and it belongs to his wife. I wonder how he ever puts up with it," cried the other, "dear Tom, that is the head of one of the oldest families in the county—far better blood than the Cliffords, whose great-grandfather was in trade; and they would all have been ruined but for dear Tom," concluded Miss Laura; "he has given himself up to their interests—and this is his reward!"

"Hush, now," said Miss Harwood, "I am sure nothing was said that could make you cry; and I see poor dear Mary herself in the pony-carriage driving down by the green. I daresay she will call here. She will be quite surprised if she sees you have been crying. Shouldn't you like to run up-stairs and set your bonnet straight?"

"I daresay she'll come in looking as bright as possible," said Miss Amelia, "and could not understand, if we were to tell her, why we

should quarrel and cry over her affairs. After all, it's a shame she shouldn't be happy, poor soul; she always makes the best of everything. There she is, kissing her hand to us already. How d'ye do; my dear? And I am sure I think she's as pretty now as when she was twenty, whatever the men may say."

"Oh dear, that's just what the men say," cried Miss Laura, with indignation, unable even at this crisis to resist the temptation: "for she always was a gentleman's beauty," added Miss Lydia, half under her breath. They were not in the least malignant, and both of them secretly liked Mary in their hearts; but they could not resist the opportunity of throwing a little javelin at her, which certainly did her no harm.

Mary did not reach the door until her sisters-in-law had put themselves in order by the help of the mirror in the back drawing-room. All this time Miss Amelia stood by the window making her comments. "Of course there is a basket to be taken out of the pony-carriage," said that mollified observer, who was nodding and smiling all the time to the new arrivals, "with a quantity of forced things in it, no doubt; for there's nothing else to be

had at this time of the year. I think I can see strawberries through the lid, which, considering it is only March, is flying in the face of nature, I think. And here is Loo. Well, I am not sure that poor Loo is not as much forced as the strawberries; she looks a long way older than her mother, it appears to me. Poor thing! perhaps it's not wonderful under the circumstances; and I think Loo would be pretty if she was free in her mind, or had time for anything but brooding over affairs. She is—let me see, eighteen at her next birthday"——

"Hush, Amelia! My dear Mary, it makes me very happy to see you," said old Miss Harwood, rising from her comfortable chair, with the slow motion of an old woman, to meet the kiss of the mistress of Fontanel. Perhaps it was the contrast of true old age which made Mary, though convicted of having been born in the year '14, appear then, in '57, so blooming, and fresh, and youthful. She had lived, on the whole, a quiet life. She had little in her constitution of that rabid selfishness which people call a sensitive temperament. She bore her troubles meekly, and got over them; and even the anxieties and uneasi-

ness of recent years had added but few wrinkles to the fair face of a woman who always believed that everything would turn out well, and heartily hoped for the best.

She came in, well-dressed, well-conditioned, sweet to look at and to listen to, in easy matronly fulness and expansion, into the pretty but straight and limited room where the two old sisters lived their life; and when she had kissed them, kissed also the two younger maidens, who were, however, of Mary's own standing—no younger than herself. They all looked grey, and relapsed into the shade in presence of her sweet looks and natural graciousness. Even Loo, who stood behind her mother's chair—a tall girl, still with great brown eyes, which counted for twice as much as their real size in her pale face—looked, as Miss Amelia said, old beside Mrs. Summerhayes. Hers were the bright but softened tints, the round outlines, the affectionate, tender, unimpassioned heart, which confers perpetual youth.

"How nice it is to see you looking so well!" said Mary. "I don't think you have grown a bit older, dear Miss Harwood, for twenty years. Loo and I have come down on pur-

pose to ask you to come to Fontanel for Charley's birthday. He comes of age, dear fellow, next month, you know; and as it is a very, very great occasion, we thought a three weeks' invitation was not too much. You must come to us the day before—the carriage will come for you—and stay at least till the day after, so that you may not be the least fatigued. We are going to have all sorts of pleasures and rejoicing; and I am sure, though I am a foolish old mother to say so," said the smiling, blooming woman, in whom light and sunshine seemed to have entered Miss Harwood's drawing-room, "that nobody has more reason to rejoice over a son than I—than we have—he has always been such a dear boy; he has never given me any anxiety in all his life."

"Well, he's only just beginning his life," said Miss Amelia. "What anxiety could he give you, except about the measles, and so forth? To be sure he might have been plucked at the university, or rusticated, or something dreadful; but I allow he's a good boy, and not too good a boy either—which is a great comfort. I am glad you are not going to stint him at his *fête:* an eldest son has a right to that, I suppose; but I hope you mean to let

him have something to do, my dear, after he comes of age,"

"To do? Oh, I daresay he will find quite enough to do, for a few years, amusing himself," said Mary, perceptibly growing paler for the moment. "Of course I am calculating upon both of you, Laura and Liddy," she said, turning round with an air of making her escape. "To ask such near friends formally would be nonsense, you know; but you must not forget the twenty-fifth; and I hope you will come early, too, and see the preparations, and the tenants' dinner, and all that is to go on out of doors."

"Oh, we have got an invitation already," said Miss Laura. "Not that we would have come unless you had asked us besides, dear Mary," chimed in Miss Lydia; "but dear Tom called this morning to tell us it was all decided upon," they both ran on together. "Such a comfort to our minds; for I am sure Liddy and I cannot bear to hear you ever have any difference of opinion," cried Miss Laura, as her solo broke upon the course of the duet. "And dear Tom is always so glad to do what will please you, dear Mary," chimed Miss Lydia, as it came to her turn.

Mary turned red and then turned pale in spite of herself. Most people have some specially sensitive spot about them, and this was Mary's: she could not endure to think that her husband consulted his sisters about things that occurred at Fontanel.

"I was not aware we had any difference of opinion," she said, with dignity; "things always have to be discussed, and Mr. Summerhayes likes to consider everything well before he takes it in hand; but, of course, we can have but one mind about Charley, who really is the owner of the estate, or at least will be after the twenty-fifth. He is so popular already," continued the mother, returning to the Miss Harwoods.

The tears came to poor Mary's eyes, notwithstanding all her efforts. She felt they were all watching her, and that to do justice both to her son and her husband was all but impossible; and besides, at that moment she was under the influence of a little irritation. Mr. Summerhayes did not *consult* his sisters, for whose judgment he had a much greater contempt than it had ever entered into the mind of Mary to entertain for any one in the world; but when he was annoyed or irritated

he occasionally took the benefit of their unreasoning sympathy and partisanship, as he had done this morning—and there was nothing in all the business which so galled and exasperated his wife.

"He always was a dear boy," said kind old Mrs. Howard; "and such a sweet baby as he was, my dear. I remember when he was born as if it were yesterday. I was just saying so before you came in. I never saw any people so happy as you, and—hem—it seems foolish, to be sure, talking of what he was as a baby now he's a man," she concluded, hurriedly stumbling over that unlucky allusion. Mary again grew a little pale, poor soul. She could not escape from her troubles anyhow—they hemmed her in on every side.

"And so all those things are for the bazaar," she said, by way of making a diversion. "Loo was to have worked you something, Miss Amelia, but Loo's fingers are not so useful as they might be. She is a great deal too fond of dreaming; but I don't think I was very fond of work myself when I was her age; and, of course, she has something in hand for Charley. A birthday would not be a birthday if the girls had not worked something

for their brother; though men are such bears, as I sometimes tell Loo," said poor Mary, beaming brightly out again from behind her cloud, "I don't think they ever look twice at the purses and slippers we do for them. I suppose the great pleasure is in the doing, as it is with most other things."

"But I am sure you never found it so with dear Tom," said Miss Laura; "he was always, from a boy, so pleased with what we made for him. Oh, do you remember those old braces, Laura?" cried Miss Lydia; "he always appreciates what is done for him—always," and both the sisters chimed in in a breath.

"I was not speaking of Mr. Summerhayes," said Mary, returning into the cloud; "I was speaking of—men in general. I have never had any perfect people to deal with in my experience," said the mistress of Fontanel, with a sidelong, female blow, which she could not resist giving. "And now we must say good-bye, dear Miss Harwood; it is so pleasant to see you, and to come into this sheltered place, where nothing ever seems to change."

"It is very odd," said Miss Amelia, as she rose to shake hands with her visitors, "you

people who are living and going through all sorts of changes, you like to come back to look at us old folks, and to say it is pleasant to see us immovable. I suppose it has all the effect of a calm background and bit of still life, as the painters say. Perhaps we don't enjoy it so much as you do; we like to have something happen now and then for a little variety; we are often sadly at a loss, if you did but know it, for an event."

"Come back soon, my dear; that will be an event for us," said Miss Harwood, whose soft, old kiss was balm to Mary's cheek, which had flushed and paled so often. Miss Laura and Miss Lydia went out to the door with their sister-in-law, where they took leave of her. "We meant to have driven on to the manor-house," said Mary; "but we need not go now, since we have seen you; and there is no room in this stupid little carriage, or I would set you down anywhere. Good-bye! don't forget the twenty-fifth!" and so she drove her ponies away. The sisters went off upon their usual round of calls, discussing her, while Mrs. Summerhayes drove through the village. They were not exactly spiteful women, and they *did* like poor Mary in their

hearts: if she had been in trouble they would have rallied to her with all their little might; but they could not help being a little hard upon her now.

"Did you hear what she said about Charley being the true owner of the estate?" said Miss Laura. "After all dear Tom has done!" said Miss Lydia. "Oh, how strangely things do turn out!" cried the elder sister. "He might have done so much better; and to get himself into all this trouble and nobody even grateful to him," said the younger. "Poor dear Tom!" they both cried together, "he deserved such a different wife."

Such was the aspect of affairs on the other side; and though it is natural to take part with poor Mary rather than with her subtle and skilful husband, perhaps his sisters were not altogether wrong. If they had not, all of them, got somehow into conflict with nature, things might have happened very differently. As it was, a perpetual false position created mischief on every side.

CHAPTER VIII

THE EVE OF THE BIRTHDAY.

"I HAVE asked old Gateshead to bring over the deeds you executed before our marriage, Mary," said Mr. Summerhayes, a few days before Charley came of age; "I want to look over them again."

"Yes!" said Mary, stopping suddenly in what she was doing, and giving one furtive glance at him. She asked no farther question, but waited with an anxious intensity of interest which almost stopped the breath on her lips.

"I want to look over them again—there are some words in the duplicates up-stairs I don't feel quite sure about," said Mr. Summerhayes.

"But, Tom, you told me they were irrevocable, and never could be meddled with," said Mary, with a sudden flush of burning color, which passed away immediately, leaving her very pale. It had been all her comfort for many a day to think that those deeds were

beyond her power—or his—to change. She could not help trembling in this sudden terror. She had no confidence in her own power to resist him—and, alas, but a wavering, uncertain confidence in him, that he would be able to resist the temptation of securing, if a change were possible, a stronger title to all the authority and power he at present, in her right, possessed.

"Do you imagine I want them meddled with?" said Mr. Summerhayes. "I don't think women understand what honesty or honor means," he added, in his harshest tone. "I suppose you believe I am ready to perjure myself, or break my word, or do anything that's base, for a bit of your estate."

"Indeed, Tom, I never thought anything of the kind," said poor Mary, faltering; but she had thought something of the kind, though her thoughts were incapable of such decided expression, and the tremor in her voice betrayed her.

"That's how it always is," said Mr. Summerhayes, without any passion, but with a concentrated sneer in his voice; "a woman who has anything always suspects her husband of an intention to rob her. Though she

may have lived with him for years, and known his thoughts and shared his plans, and thought him good enough to be her companion and protector, the moment she recurs to her money he becomes a robber, and nothing is too base for him to do. No," he went on, breathing out a long breath of indignation apparently, and offended virtue; "I don't want to alter the deeds—but I want to read over one clause with Gateshead, to make sure it's all right. You would not like your children to go to law about it after you are dead?"

"No," said Mary, with a slight shiver; her fears and her imagination were roused. She, of course, knew nothing about the law, except a general impression that it was never safe to have anything to do with it. She had, however, an unreasoning faith in the efficacy of anything solemnly signed and witnessed, which, notwithstanding, if anybody threw the least doubt upon that document, changed instantly into a total scepticism and unbelief of any value in it at all. She jumped at conclusions, as is the habit of women; and from the most perfect confidence in the security of Fontanel, instantly plunged into the wildest uneasiness about it, and already saw herself

compelled to alienate the inheritance from her children;—and all this because Mr. Summerhayes had remarked some expression in one clause which struck him as of doubtful meaning—at least that was all the actual foundation upon which Mary could build her fears.

So it was with feelings of an extremely mingled and doubtful character that she proceeded with her arrangements for the birthday *fête*, which, to tell the truth, Mr. Summerhayes had strongly opposed—he could not very well have told why. Charley was the heir of the estate, as indisputable as if his father had been still its master; yet there was a great difference; and perhaps the stepfather did not feel himself quite equal to the necessary speeches nor to the cordiality which would be required of him on such a day. Mr. Summerhayes had managed everything so completely in his own way—he had felt the house so entirely his own these five years, which yet was not his own, nor vested in him by any natural right—that the idea of acknowledging as much virtually, if not in distinct words, by this public recognition of the heir, galled him strangely. He would rather have gone out of the way; but

as he could not go out of the way, he adopted, half unconsciously, the only mode that remained of making himself disagreeable—he found out that possible flaw in the deed. Probably nothing further was in his thoughts than to express the discontent in his mind, and throw a little shadow of insecurity upon the festivities which were sacred to the too-confident heir. Like an ill-tempered father keeping up his power by a vague threat of altering his will, Mr. Summerhayes waved his threatening flag over the heads of the family at Fontanel by this faint cloud of suspicion thrown upon the invincible certainty of the deed. He meant nothing more; but evil thoughts are suggestive, and have a wonderful power of cumulation. Perhaps he did mean something more before old Gateshead, whom, on other occasions, he did not hesitate to call an old fogy, was disembarked from his old-fashioned chaise at the door, two days before Charley's birthday. The firm was Gateshead and Gateshead—but Europe and Asia are not more unlike than were its two members. The elder was, as Mr. Summerhayes succinctly expressed it, an old fogy—the other, an acute and tolerably accomplished young

man of the world. Mr. Courtenay Gateshead, in ordinary cases, was Mr. Summerhayes' favorite, and was honored with his confidence; but on this special occasion old Mr. Gateshead—whose acuteness was somewhat blunted by age—who was a wonderful gossip and genealogist, and who had the most profound respect for the superior legal knowledge of the master of Fontanel, who had once been of the Inner Temple—was, as an old friend of the family, the selected guest.

Mr. Gateshead arrived with a big portmanteau and a little tin box. He was rather nervous about this little tin box. He carried it into the drawing-room with him, where he went on his arrival, being a great deal too early for dinner, as old fogies, who are not much wanted in the drawing-room, generally are. But Mary was very glad to see him, as an old friend, and looked at him with a kind of half-conscious appeal in her eyes, of which Mr. Gateshead was totally unaware, and which he would have been completely bewildered by could he have seen it. He made some absurd mistakes to be sure. He called her Mrs. Clifford, even in Mr. Summerhayes' presence; and then, instead of prudently ignoring his

mistake, begged her pardon, and laughed and talked of his bad memory. But the tin box was a heavy burden on the old man's mind. Every ten minutes or so he paused in his talk, which was voluminous, to say, "Bless my soul, where is that box?" and to shift it from the table or chair on which he had placed it, to a chair or table nearer. The box oppressed him even in the midst of the gossip in which his soul delighted. He took it up to his room with him, but hesitated, not seeing how he could leave it by itself when he came down to dinner; and at last gratefully accepted Mr. Summerhayes's offer to put it in his own study, where all his own papers were, and which nobody dared go into. It seemed safe under the secure shelter of Mr. Summerhayes, whose absolute monarchy was indisputable, and with whose personalities nobody in Fontanel ventured to interfere. There, accordingly, the tin box was deposited, and there, after dinner, somewhat reluctantly on the part of old Gateshead, who was fond of the society of the ladies, and of Mrs. Summerhayes in particular, the two gentlemen adjourned, to talk over that flaw, or possibility of a flaw, in the deeds which were the safeguard of the young Clif-

fords. They sat late discussing that and other affairs—so late that it seemed quite the middle of the night to Mary when her husband awoke her with a cheerful face, to say that Gateshead was of opinion—and he agreed with him, after the close examination they had given it—that the deed was quite unassailable, so that she might have a perfectly easy mind on the subject. "I thought I might run the risk of a cross look for breaking your sleep, Mary, when this was what I had to say. I am very glad myself, for it might have been awkward, as no power was reserved to you under our settlement of will-making, or that sort of thing," said Mr. Summerhayes. "However, it's all right. I left that old fogy pottering over his tin box in my study. I hope he'll not set himself on fire before he gets to bed. He's getting old very fast, Mary. Young Courtenay will soon have everything his own way."

Poor Mary was so pleased, so delighted, so thankful, that it was a long time before she could get to sleep again. She lay half dreaming and dozing, with an exquisite compunction and renewal of love in her heart. Had she perhaps suspected this good husband, who

came so joyfully to tell her that all was safe? She made it up to him by the fullest, most lavish restoration of confidence, as was natural to a generous woman; and in the happiest thankful state of mind, though with an odd, half-dreaming fancy that old Gateshead had set fire to himself, and that she smelt his nightcap smouldering into slow destruction, fell finally, when it was almost dawn, into a sound sleep.

But Mary could not believe that she had been more than a few minutes asleep when she was awoke by the horrible clangor of the alarm-bell, and by the rushing and screaming of all the servants. Could it be old Gateshead's nightcap that caused that terrible significant sniff of burning that pervaded the entire atmosphere? Before she could wake her husband, who lay in a profound sleep, Charley had rushed in at the door with the alarming cry of fire. "Fire!—get up, mother, make haste, but don't flurry yourself; put something on; it's in the west wing. There's time to escape," cried Charley. "I'll get out the children, and come back for you," he said, as he rushed off again.

"Fire!" cried Mr. Summerhayes, springing

up. "Good Heavens! It's that old fool, old Gateshead. How could I be so mad as to trust him by himself?" And almost before Mary knew he was awake, he, too, had rushed out of the room, drawing on his dressing-gown as he flew out at the door.

"Oh, Tom, see to the children; don't leave me!" cried Mary in her fright; and she, too, wrapped herself hastily in the first garment she could find, and rushed to the door. She could see nothing but a thick volume of smoke pouring from the west wing through the entire house, into which her husband's figure disappeared, while every soul in the place seemed emerging out of it in different varieties of fright and undress.

"We've sent off for the fire-engines; and don't be alarmed, mother, it's entirely in the west wing," cried Charley, who came towards her with Alf in one arm and little Mary in the other. Harry and Loo came crouching close to the big brother behind—all silent, all ready to cry, all staring with wide-open, suddenly-awakened eyes, and frightened out of their very lives.

"Oh, Charley, Mr. Summerhayes will be killed!—Where is he going? Is it to look for

Mr. Gateshead?" cried Mary, who, when she saw her children safe, fell into a panic about her husband. He had rushed into the very depths of that black volume of smoke, in spite of many warning voices. He came staggering back after a few minutes, half-suffocated, to the staircase, where he sat down to recover himself.

"Oh, Tom, Mr. Gateshead is safe!" cried Mary, who was shivering in her shawl with cold and terror, and who would not leave her husband, though the smoke came nearer and nearer.

"D— Mr. Gateshead!" cried the excited master of the house. "Charley, fly to the other side—to the window—my study—the tin box! I'll take care of your mother," he shouted, as Charley appeared coming back.

When he had placed Mary in safety, Mr. Summerhayes himself hurried to the same spot. It was he alone who mounted the ladder, though everybody else said it was madness. But it would have been as sane a proceeding to walk into a furnace as into that room, which was the very centre of the fire. He came down again deadly pale, and almost fainting, with a hurt on his head from a fall-

ing beam, and half-suffocated with the fiery smoke. The tin box was beyond the possibility of redemption.

But the fire, curiously enough, scarcely penetrated beyond the west wing, which was an unimportant part of the house—a recent addition, where nobody slept, and which, indeed, contained little that was important, except Mr. Summerhayes' study, which had been built after his own design, and contained all his pet and personal belongings. Mary and the children watched from the gardener's cottage the working of the fire-engines; and in the excitement of seeing how the fire was got under, and how little damage, after all, was done to Fontanel, forgot the misery of the morning and their comfortless circumstances. Even Loo felt that her stepfather was to be regarded as a hero, when he came, pale, black, and begrimed—after it became apparent that the work of destruction was stopped—to the cottage, to have his head bound up, and to see that his wife and her children were safe. And perhaps Loo was still better disposed towards him when she found that he did not take upon himself any heroic airs, but was in a most savage temper,

cursing old Gateshead as nobody had ever before heard Mr. Summerhayes curse any man. "I was rash not to see him safe to bed," cried the master of the burning house; and Mary did all she could, in her generous way, to deprecate and excuse "the poor old man." "Nobody is to blame; it must have been an accident—only an accident," said Mary; and Mr. Summerhayes, in his rage and vexation, had not even the grace to be civil to her, but still muttered curses upon old Gateshead.

While, for his part, Mr. Gateshead went round and round what had been the west wing, wringing his hands. "Burned!—lost! —my tin box. I will never dare look Courtenay in the face again; and, good Lord! what's to become of the children?" cried the poor old lawyer. He could not help hearing some of Mr. Summerhayes' passionate exclamations, and perceived, by the way everybody hustled past him, that he was blamed for the sudden calamity. Though he was an old fogy, he was as sensitive as any man to a personal grievance. Very soon he began to think about this mysterious business. "Good Lord, the deed! the poor dear children!" said

the old lawyer to himself. He, too, grew angry and pale with indignation; but he kept silence and his own counsel. This was the strange and ill-omened event which happened at Fontanel the day before Charley's coming of age.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FIRE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

The idea of a fire—of a fire in one's own house, darkly raging in the silence of the night, threatening death to helpless sleepers in their beds—is too overwhelming at first to allow the minds of the startled sufferers in ordinary circumstances to enter into details. Mary, for her part, found so many things to be grateful for—first, she was so thankful that all were safe—second, so glad to find that even the house was not injured to any serious degree—and, third, so proud of the energy and zeal of her husband—that the real loss was a long time of becoming fairly visible to her. Before it dawned upon his mother,

Charley, worn out as he was by his exertions, had realised what it was; and had felt, with a strange momentary thrill and shock through his whole frame, that the foundations of the world were crumbling under his feet, and that he dared no longer boast of the morrow. Loo too, who had been almost enthusiastic about her step-father in that first hour of his heroism, had fallen back again, and was paler than ever, and looked more wistfully out of her background with those great brown eyes. But still Mary continued to kiss little Alf, who was rather impatient of the process, and rejoice over her children. "If it had broken out anywhere else," she said, "we might all have been burned in our beds. Was it not a wonderful interposition of Providence, Tom, when there was to be a fire, to think it should be there? We had not even any association with the west wing—except you, dear—I am sure I beg your pardon—but you rather enjoyed building the study, and you must make another one. I shall always think it a special Providence the fire was there."

"You don't know what you're saying, Mary," said her husband; "it was not Providence, it was that confounded old ——. Oh,

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Mr. Gateshead! are you in the least aware of how this happened? Did you drop your candle, or a match, or anything? or were you burning any of your papers? It is a horrible misfortune to have happened just now."

"But really, Tom, the house is so little injured it won't matter for to-morrow," said Mary; "things can go on just as before."

"Oh!" said her husband, with a little groan, "don't talk so lightly; you don't know what's happened. Gateshead, why on earth didn't you go at once to bed?"

"Mr. Summerhayes, I'll thank you to leave off that sort of thing," said the old lawyer, divided between fear and indignation. "I am not stupid, sir, as you try to make people believe, though I am older than you are. It's a very strange circumstance, but if Providence has not done it, as you say, neither have I. But I'll tell you what is your duty, Mr. Summerhayes. Before I leave here, which shall be to-day, I'll draw out a draught-deed to correspond with this one that is unfortunately burnt"——

"What deed do you mean? burnt?" cried Mary, in dismay; "not *that* deed"——

"Yes, Mrs. Clifford—I beg your pardon

Mrs. Summerhayes—exactly *that* deed," said the solicitor; "and you should not lose a moment in executing it over again—not a moment, especially considering that Charley is just of age."

"*That* deed!" cried Mary; "oh Tom!" She turned to him in simple distress and lamentation; but he met her eyes with such a strange defiance, and the color rose so perceptibly in his cheek, that Mary stopped short, petrified. What did it mean? She turned round alarmed, and met the curious eyes of old Gateshead, who was studying her looks, with something like confusion. For the moment her heart, as she thought, stopped beating in poor Mary's troubled breast.

"You should not lose a moment—it ought to be done over again," said the old man, "while I am here to prevent any informality. It ought at once to be done over again."

"Mrs. Summerhayes unfortunately has no power to do anything," said her husband. "No such unfortunate chance was calculated upon at our marriage. No right was reserved to her of making any settlement. You know that well enough, Gateshead."

"That can be obviated by your joining

with her," said the lawyer. "You could do that, at least, till there's time to take advice on the subject; for burning only revokes where there's an intention of revoking, as you're aware, Mr. Summerhayes—and so long as we can prove what was the general purport"——

"In that case there's no need for doing anything further," said the master of Fontanel.

"But the matter is too important to be left on a chance," said the old lawyer, anxiously; "nobody can ever tell what may happen. For Charley's sake you ought not to lose an hour. I'll draw up a draft"——

"Oh, Tom, listen to Mr. Gateshead!" cried poor Mary, trying to smile, though her heart felt as if it were breaking, as she laid a timid, beseeching hand on his arm.

Her husband threw her hand slightly off, and turned away. "There is no reason in the world why we should rush into fresh documents," he said. "Stuff! we are not going to die to-day; and if we did die to-day, why, Mary, your heirs are as safe as ever they were. I'll think it over, Gateshead, and see Courtenay about it. There is no hurry; and, upon

my word, whatever you may think of the subject, I have had about enough of excitement for one day."

"Does your head ache, Tom?" said Mrs. Summerhayes.

"Abominably; and look here," said her husband, exhibiting his hands, which were considerably burned, "if I am to be made fit for presentation to-morrow, you'll have to nurse me, Mary. Come along, I have a great deal to talk to you about. I beg your pardon, Gateshead, but now that everything is safe, considering what I have before me to-morrow, I must get a little rest."

"Then I am to understand that you refuse to do anything in place of the deed that has been burned," said the old lawyer.

"Refuse? certainly not; I'll think of it, and see Courtenay about it. We can talk it over at dinner," said Mr. Summerhayes, walking away calmly towards the house with his wife.

This conversation had taken place at the gardener's cottage, within hearing of Loo, who had all this time been standing at the window. When Mary and her husband went away, the old lawyer uttered a furious and

profane exclamation. "He'll speak to Courtenay. I'm not to be trusted, I suppose; confound the upstart!" cried old Gateshead; "but I shan't stay here to be insulted by Tom Summerhayes. Lord bless us! what's the matter, my dear?"

This question was addressed to Loo, who came suddenly up to him, overwhelming the old man with the gaze of her great brown eyes. "Tell me only one thing—is Charley disinherited?" said Loo, grasping with her slight but firm fingers the lawyer's arm.

"My dear, you don't understand it," said Mr. Gateshead.

"I understand it perfectly; is Charley disinherited?" asked the anxious girl.

"Well, my dear, it depends on circumstances," said the lawyer; "don't look at me so fiercely, it is not my doing. The deeds are destroyed—that's all. I daresay it won't make any difference. We can prove —— Don't cry, my dear child; *I'll* stand by you if he tries to do anything—and you can tell your brother so. It shan't make any difference if I can help it—don't cry."

"I don't mean to cry," said Loo, with indignation; "is this why the fire was?" The

words seemed to drop from her lips before she was aware; then a violent blush rushed over poor Loo's pale face; she shrank back, and took her hand from his arm, and turned her face away. "I did not mean to say that; I meant to say—I understand," said Loo, slowly. It was a very woe-begone, despairing face that she turned upon him when she looked round again. The old man, who had known her all her life, patted her on the head as if she had been still a child.

"Don't be afraid, my dear, things will come straight; though your stepfather has been rude to me, I will not go away for your sakes," said Mr. Gateshead; but such a conversation as this could not be carried on. The lawyer returned to the house to be present at the investigation into the cause of the fire which Mr. Summerhayes was already making; and Loo, for her part, sick at heart, and in a state of the profoundest despair, went out to seek her brother. It was just as well for both that they did not meet that morning; for neither of the two in their hearts had any doubt upon the subject. As for their mother, she kept by her husband's side, in a state of mind not to be described; taking hope by

times; listening with eager anxiety to hear any explanation that could be offered; trying to believe that he only hesitated to replace the destroyed deed because he had no confidence in old Gateshead, and preferred to consult Courtenay; but in heart feeling, like Charley, that total shipwreck had happened, and that the foundations of the earth were giving way.

CHAPTER X.

A VERY SURPRISING OCCURRENCE.

The ruins of the west wing were clearly visible from the great wooden building erected by Mr. Summerhayes in the park where the tenants were to dine. It was too cold in March for a tent; and there was no room in Fontanel large enough for these festivities; except the great double suite of drawing-rooms where the doors had been removed, and where there was to be a ball at night. Much was the talk about the alarming event of the previous day, which had shaken half the

country with personal terrors, much warmer than are generally awakened by the intelligence of a fire at a friend's house. On hearing of it, every soul within twenty miles had sighed with resignation or cried out with impatience, giving up all hopes of the festivities to which everybody had been looking forward; but Mr. Summerhayes' messengers with the intimation that all was going on as before, came about as soon as the news of the calamity. Mr. Summerhayes himself was more gracious, more cordial, than anybody had ever known him. He spoke of "our dear boy" in his speech to the farmers, and described Charley in such terms, that the heart of Charley's mother was altogether melted, and she felt ready to commit the fate of her children a dozen times over into her husband's hands. Nothing could be more manly, more honorable, more affectionate, than the way in which Mr. Summerhayes spoke of his own position. He was, he said, his wife's steward and his son's guardian; such a position might have been painful to some men—but love made everything sweet; and he was happy in having always had the entire confidence of his beloved clients. He even re-

ferred to the honored husband of the Queen, as in something of a similar position to his own, and brought down storms of applause. Charley made his little speech with great difficulty after his stepfather. The poor boy looked ghastly, and could scarcely get the words out; but his pleased retainers, who believed him overwhelmed by his feelings, applauded all the same. When he had done what was required of him, Charley managed to steal away unperceived by anybody except Loo, who went wistfully after her brother. She overtook him by the time he had got to the woods that skirted the park, and put her arm softly within his without saying anything. The two young creatures wandered under the bristling budded trees in silence, with unspeakable sadness in their hearts. They had nothing to say to console each other—or rather Loo, whose very heart wept over her brother, could think of nothing to say to him. At last, caressing his arm with her tender, timid, little hand, Loo ventured upon one suggestion: "Oh, Charley, poor mamma!" said the girl in her heart-breaking young voice. "Yes—poor mamma!" said Charley, with a groan. Poor Mary! It was all her doing,

yet her children cast no reproach upon her. She after all would be the greatest sufferer.

"But, Loo, I can't stop here after what has happened," said Charley, when they had both recovered a little; "he may be going to do everything that's right for anything we can tell. Don't let us talk as if it were anybody's fault; but I can't stop here, you know, about Fontanel, doing nothing, as if—— Don't cry, Loo. You would not like, anyhow, to have an idle fellow for a brother. Harry is the clever one; but I daresay my godfather, the old general, could get me a commission; and I could live on my pay," said Charley, with a slight quiver in his upper lip, "and perhaps get on. I don't think I should make a bad soldier—only that there's the examinations, and all that. It's very hard, Loo, to have lost all this time."

"Oh, Charley, Charley dear! I can't bear it—it's too hard to put up with," cried poor little passionate Loo.

"Now don't you go and take away what little strength a fellow has," remonstrated Charley; "it must be put up with, and what's the use of talking? Now look here, Loo; if you make a fuss, it will do no good in the

world, but only vex mamma; she can't mend it, you know. I mean to put the best face on it, and say I want to see the world, and that sort of thing; and believe exactly as if—as if the fire had never happened," said Charley, with a dark momentary cloud upon his face. "I can make my mother believe me; and it will be a comfort to her to have me out of the way," said the heroic lad, with something like a suppressed sob, "and to think I don't suspect anything. It *is* hard—I don't say anything else; but, Loo, we must bear it all the same."

And so they went wandering through the bare woods, poor Loo stooping now and then unawares to gather some violets according to her girlish habits, and Charley, even in the depths of his distress, following with his eye the startled squirrel running along a branch. They were profoundly, forlornly, exquisitely sad, but they could not ignore the alleviations of their youth. Amid all the sudden shock of this disinheritance—in which there mingled so cruel a sense of wrong, so warm an indignation and resentment—Charley still thought, with a rising thrill of courage and pride, that he might carve out for himself a better for-

tune; while Loo, her brother's sole confidante and supporter, was herself supported by that exquisite confidence of being able to console and encourage him, which almost atones to a girl's heart for every misfortune. They could hear the distant echoes of the cheers and laughter and loud cordial talk of the guests, while they strayed along silent, with hearts too full to speak. Very different anticipations had the two entertained of this famous day so long looked forward to. They were to be the first in all the rejoicings undertaken in their honor—for the glory of the heir apparent could not fail to be shared by the Princess Royal, the eldest daughter of Fontanel; they had pictured to themselves a brilliant momentary escape out of the embarrassments and restraints which they could not but be conscious of at home, and Charley had even been prepared to feel magnanimous to Mr. Summerhayes, who, after all, was but a temporary interloper, and had no right to that inheritance of which the young Clifford was heir indisputable. Now, the sound of the merrymaking went to Charley's heart with acute blows of anguish. It was an aggravation of the sudden misery, cold-blooded and odious; what were

they rejoicing about? Because a poor boy had come to the coveted years of manhood, to learn bitterly, on the eve of what should have been his triumph, that he was an absolute dependant, a beggar, at the mercy of a stepfather. No wonder he could not speak; no wonder he put up his hands to his ears, and uttered a groan of rage and wretchedness when that burst of cheering came upon the wind, and Loo, speechless, could but cry and clench her little hands in the bitterness of her heart. This was between the tenants' dinner and the ball in the evening, which was to be the gayest ever known in the county. Poor Charley would gladly have faced a tiger, or led a forlorn hope, could he have had such an alternative, instead of arraying himself in sumptuous raiment and appearing at that ball, where his presence would be indispensable. He seized poor Loo's little hands harshly in his own, and pressed them till she could have screamed for pain. "Don't cry; your eyes will be red at the ball—your first ball, Loo!" cried her brother, with a kind of savage tenderness; and Loo, half afraid of this strange new development of the man out of the boy, was fain to dry her poor eyes and cling to his

arm, and coax him to go in to prepare for the greater trial of the night.

While these two forlorn young creatures were thus engaged, another conversation was taking place at a distance from the scene of the festivities, in the park of Fontanel. Mr. Courtenay Gateshead had come down to be present at the tenants' dinner in his capacity as legal adviser to Mr. Summerhayes; but the young lawyer looked on with a preoccupied air, sometimes casting a keen look of inspection at the master of the feast. When the party from the great house left the humble revellers, Courtenay, instead of joining Mr. Summerhayes, beckoned aside his uncle and partner. Old Gateshead had stayed for the children's sake; but had found it totally impossible to change Mr. Summerhayes' first determination. He would not consent to read, much less to sign the document hastily prepared by the anxious old lawyer. He would think it over, he repeated, and see Courtenay, with an implied slight upon the powers and skill of Courtenay's uncle, which galled the old man to the last degree. The young lawyer found his relative exceedingly sulky and out of temper. "I have something particu-

lar to consult you about," Courtenay said, who did not yet know anything about the destruction of the deed; and Mr. Gateshead, who had that disclosure to make, followed him with no very pleasant feelings to the verge of the wood, not very far from where Charley and Loo were wandering in the despair of their hearts. But the old lawyer was much taken by surprise by the question which his nephew did not put to him till they were quite alone, and sheltered from all eavesdroppers by the broad expanse of the park.

"Uncle, you have a wonderful memory. I suppose you remember John Clifford, this boy's grandfather—he who broke the entail," said Courtenay, in rather a hurried voice.

"John Clifford—what on earth has he got to do with it?" cried old Gateshead, whose memory was wonderful, but whose powers of comprehension were not equally vivid.

"Oh, nothing, I daresay," said his nephew. "I want to know what you recollect about him, that's all—he who joined his father in breaking the entail"——

"A very silly thing to do, Courtenay—a fatal thing to do. Good Lord, only think

what a different position these poor children might have been in!" cried old Gateshead.

"Yes, yes—to be sure; but do you recollect anything about John?" said the young man.

"I recollect everything about him," said the uncle. "Though he was Harry Clifford's father, and they are both dead ages ago, he was no older than I am. I think we were born in the same year"——

"The same year? and you are seventy; that must have been '87. Was it '87, uncle? how can we make sure?" said young Courtenay. "I must hunt up the register of baptisms to-morrow."

"Ah! I remember some talk about that," said the old lawyer. "The parish books were burned once, and the entry couldn't be found. There was some talk about it at the time. Burned! I suppose you don't know what's happened in this fire! Oh! you'll hear; you'll hear quite soon enough. But what has John Clifford's name come up about now?"

"It's something rather important for Summerhayes—he looks in wonderful force to-day," said Courtenay; "but if this should turn out true, he will soon sing small enough. I may as well tell you at once, uncle, for I am almost

sure about it. My impression is, that the entail was never legally broken; and, consequently, that Mr. Clifford had no more right than I have to leave the property to his wife."

Old Gateshead looked at his nephew with a stupified air. "The entail was never broken?" he repeated vacantly, looking in the other's face.

"No—the entail was never legally broken," said Courtenay, with the impatience of an acute and rapid intelligence. "The thing caught my attention some time ago, but I would not speak of it till I had worked it out. John Clifford—listen uncle—executed the papers with his father in the year 1806; and, if I am correct, he was then an infant, and incapable of doing anything of the sort. I don't believe he came of age till 1807. By Jove! what's the matter? the old man's mad!"

"No, Courtenay, the old man's not mad," said his uncle. "Hurrah! God save the Queen! Hurrah! why don't you help them to shout, you cold-blooded young prig? I tell you the boy's saved. Hurrah, and long life to him!" said old Gateshead, waving his hat

frantically, and echoing with the wildest shrill enthusiasm the distant cheers from the tent. "I declare to you these cheers choked me an hour ago," cried the old lawyer; "there's things a man can't do, even when he's an attorney. Courtenay, I say, shake hands. You're a disgusting young prig, and you're a deal too clever for my practice; but if you make it out, I'll give in to you all my life. Good Lord, that's news! tell me all about it. We've got a sharp one to deal with; we'll have to make very sure, very sure. Let's hear every step how you came to find it out."

Which Courtenay accordingly did, and made it perfectly clear to the anxious listener. Charley's grandfather had been in the unpleasant predicament of having no public legal record of his age; but fifty years after the occurrence of that fortunate mistake, scraps of documents had turned up in the hands of the family solicitor, depositories for generations of the family secrets and difficulties, which made it easy to establish, not by one distinct statement, but by many concurring scraps of evidence, the exact date of John Clifford's birth; and to prove, as the young lawyer was now prepared to do, that the entail had

never been legally broken; that all the acts of the last two reigns were founded on a mistake; that, consequently, Squire Henry's will in so far as it related to the estate of Fontanel, was null and void, and Charley was no longer heir, but *bonâ fide* proprietor of the lands of the Cliffords. Wonderful news—more than ever wonderful that day.

When Mr. Courtenay Gateshead sought Mr. Summerhayes to break to him this startling intelligence, the elder lawyer went to find the mistress of Fontanel, who was reposing in her dressing-room, to prepare for the exertions of the evening. Poor Mary was in a very doubtful state of mind that day. She had wept for delight and gratitude when she heard her husband's speech to the farmers; but when she came to be by herself again, that enthusiastic impression wore off, and the fact came back to her, striking chill to her heart—the fact that the children were now at the stepfather's mercy, and that poor Charley, the heir, was no longer the heir unless another man pleased. Alas! poor Mary knew now, to the bottom of her heart, that it was another man—a man who, though she was his wife, did not, and could not, look on Charley Clif-

ford as his son. She knew nothing about law, nor that the deed, though destroyed, might yet in its ashes form foundation enough for any amount of lawsuits. It *was* destroyed, and she had no longer any power, and everything was in Mr. Summerhayes' hands—that was enough to quench the light out of the very skies to the poor mother. She dared not say to herself what she feared, nor what she thought he would do; she only felt that he had the power, and that Charley was at his mercy—and behind all, bitterest of all, that it was her fault. She was sitting resting, in a kind of heavy gloom and stupor, with her head buried in her hands, feeling to her heart that she was avoided by her children, and that this day of triumph was to them a day of mockery, when Mr. Gateshead's message was brought her. He was a very old friend, and her first thought was that he had at last prevailed on Mr. Summerhayes to consent to the new deed. She got up in eager haste, and sent her maid to bring him up-stairs. She received the old man there, in that room where her children no longer came as of old. The result was, not very long after, a hurried ringing of bells, and messengers running

everywhere for Miss Loo, who was just then coming in, dark and pale from the woods, a very woe-begone little figure in her holiday-dress. Poor Mary, overcome by a hundred emotions which she did not dare to tell, had fainted almost in old Gateshead's arms, to the great dismay of the old lawyer. It was deliverance to her boy, but it was utter humiliation and downfall to her husband. In the struggle of sudden joy, confusion and pain, her senses and her mind gave way for the moment. Loo, rushing in, vaguely aware that something had happened which was well for Charley, believed for the moment, in an overwhelming revulsion of remorse and repentance, that all was henceforward to be ill for ever, and that her mother was dead. But Mary was not dead. She recovered to appear at the ball—very gracious and sweet, as was her wont, but paler than anybody had ever seen her before, as was remarked everywhere. It was a pretty ball, everybody allowed; but the family looked more *distrait* and strange than any family, even under such an infliction, had ever been seen to look. Charley, who had most command of himself after his mother, was doing everything a young man could do

to keep his partners amused and the crowd occupied: but even Charley now and then grew abstracted, and forgot himself for a moment. As for Loo, though it was her first ball, and her brown eyes were splendid in the changeable light that quivered in their depths, she kept behind her mother with a look of fright and timidity, at which many a more experienced young lady sneered openly; while Mrs. Summerhayes, moving about among her guests with all her usual sweetness, in her mature beauty, could be seen sometimes to give strange, wistful looks aside to where her husband stood, mostly in company with Courtenay Gateshead. Mary was pale, but Mr. Summerhayes was flushed and strange to look upon. He said, in his gentlemanly way, that the ball was his wife's business, and that he did not pretend to help Mrs. Summerhayes. He kept aloof from her and from her children, clinging, as it seemed, to young Gateshead. There had been a fire to be sure, but a fire only in the west wing, where nothing particular could have happened. What could it be? for the county people were all quick to perceive that something unusual was in the air—at least the ladies did,

and did not fail to communicate their suspicions. There must have been a family quarrel, the more acute imagined; and Miss Laura and Miss Lydia Summerhayes, whom their brother dismissed summarily when they attempted sisterly investigations, were fain to make forlorn attempts to discover from Loo what it was. The master of the house had never been seen to speak or look at any of the family all the evening, till the principal guests were in the supper-room, all wondering, as they discussed the good things there, what could be the matter. Charley had got in debt at the university—Charley had formed some unsuitable connexion—and his stepfather was hard upon him. Thus the company speculated; but the company held its breath when Mr. Summerhayes laid his hand on Charley's shoulder, and solved the wonder of the evening in the strangest, most unexpected manner—to nobody so unexpected as to his bewildered wife.

"My friends," said Mr. Summerhayes, in his gentlemanly way (and it must be allowed that, whatever were his faults, Tom Summerhayes always was a gentleman), "we drank this boy's health to-day as the heir of Fonta-

nel; but since that something has happened which has excited us all considerably, as I daresay you will have perceived; and I have to tell you that Charley is not only the heir, but the master of this house. I am sure," continued Mr. Summerhayes, leaning his arm more heavily upon the shoulder of the astonished youth, "there never was a more hopeful or promising beginning than he will make, and I know he will have all your good wishes. The fact is that the property became my wife's under a mistake: the entail was supposed to have been broken, which turns out not to have been the case; and it is an additional pleasure to us," said Mary's husband, turning round with a smile to meet her look, which was fixed upon him, and then leisurely surveying the amazed assembly—"it is a great additional pleasure to us," continued Mr. Summerhayes, "to find ourselves entitled, on a day every way so happy, to give up our laborious stewardship, and put our boy in possession of his own. I ask you over again, my excellent friends and neighbors, to drink the health of Charles Clifford of Fontanel."

It was thus that Mr. Summerhayes extricated himself from his false position. The

cheers which disturbed all the loiterers in the ball-room, and brought them in a crowd to see what it was, were more for the retiring monarch than the new sovereign. Charley himself, in a warm revulsion of his generous heart, had seized both his stepfather's hands, and wrung them with strenuous gratitude. "I will never forget your generosity," cried the eager boy, who would have made over Fontanel there and then, had Summerhayes pleased, into his keeping over again. Charley knew nothing of the stormy scene with Courtenay—the silent rage and mortification which had thrown off Mary's attempts at consolation before necessity and his better genius warned Mr. Summerhayes of this opportunity left him for a graceful retreat. Charley did not know, nor the world—and the few who did know had no wish to remember. The whole party was in a flutter of admiration; and poor Miss Laura and Miss Lydia did all but go into hysterics between horror at the catastrophe and pride in their brother. Never before had Mr. Summerhayes of the Manor taken so high a position before the county as that night when he gave up possession of Fontanel.

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. SUMMERHAYES.

"It is not to be expected she can like it much; but she is a good little woman—she always was a dear little woman," said the Rector; "and Mary's jointure will make a great deal of difference in the Manor-house, and smooth things down considerably. She has been doing all kinds of upholstery there already."

"By Jove, I knew how it would be!" said Major Aldborough; "I told you all how it would be. I said they'd kill him. He may think he's got off very easily, in my opinion—cure him of meddling with other people's children as long as he lives. What the deuce did he want at Fontanel? a great deal better to make himself snug, as I suppose he means to do now, at Summerhayes."

"Mary will drive down looking just as bright as ever," said Miss Amelia Harwood. "I always said she deserved to be happy, poor soul—she always makes the best of

everything. Her heart was breaking that night of Charley's birthday. I heard for a certain fact that she fainted just before the ball—a thing I never heard of Mary doing before. Heaven knows what all she was afraid of; there was something very mysterious about that fire; but now, you know, she has recovered her spirits and her color, and looks just as she used to look. I shouldn't wonder a bit if she began life over again, and was quite happy in the Manor-house now Tom Summerhayes is coming home."

"And so she ought to be, Amelia," said good Miss Harwood. "I am sure she has many a poor woman's prayers."

All these good people were walking on the Fontanel road. It was a lovely evening in the early summer, more than a year after Charley Clifford's birthday. Though it was rather beyond the usual limits of Miss Harwood's walk, she was here leaning on Miss Amelia's arm to enjoy the air, and to look for somebody who was expected. The Rector had strolled out on the same errand; and that, or something similar, had also drawn Major Aldborough from his after-dinner repose. The old-fashioned gates of the Manor-

house were open, and some expectation was visible within. Miss Laura and Miss Lydia, in very summery muslin dresses, were to be seen promenading before the house, and hastened out, when they saw the Miss Harwoods, to join their friends.

"It is very trying for us," said Miss Laura. "Oh, Miss Harwood, it is a very trying occasion; not that our new house is not very nice and everything very comfortable; but it is very trying to us," said Miss Lydia, joining in; "and oh, on dear Tom's part, such an unexpected change!"

"Your brother is expected home to-morrow, Miss Laura?" said the Rector.

"Yes, to-morrow," answered Miss Lydia, whose turn it was. "Poor dear Tom is so fond of travelling on the continent, it is so good for his health; and Mrs. Summerhayes wishes to be at home to receive him. Lydia and I are so glad, and yet we are sorry," chimed in Miss Laura; "it will be such a change for dear Tom."

"Not nearly so great a change as for poor Mary," said Miss Amelia, "leaving her children, poor soul; but I daresay she won't complain, and it must be better for all parties to

have it settled. And so you like your new house. I am told that Mary did all the furnishing herself."

"Oh yes, she is very kind," said Miss Laura; "she has made everything very nice; you must come and see it. Indeed, if it were not for thinking what a change it is for dear Tom," cried the sisters, both together, with an evident impression that their brother had been defrauded of something he had a right to, "we should all be very happy; for dear Mary," said Miss Lydia, with a little sob, "is very kind—and look, here she comes."

She came driving the pony-carriage, as she had appeared so often at Summerhayes. Poor Mary! if she had been a wiser woman would she have been loved as well? She came, all beaming, with the smile on her lip and the tear in her eye—courageous, affectionate, sweet as ever. Charley and Loo had ridden down with her till they came in sight of Summerhayes, and then had taken leave of their mother. Mary, with little Mary by her side in the pony-carriage, drove on to her separate fate alone. She was going to take possession of the old Manor-house, no longer the mistress of Fontanel, but Tom Summerhayes' wife, to

receive him when he came home from his travels, and to make life bright—if he were capable of seeing it—to that imperfect and not very worthy man. The agitation in her face was only enough to heighten a little her sweet color and brighten her tearful eyes. On the whole, had she not great reason to be happy? She had forgotten everything but her husband's virtues while he had been absent, and her children were safe and prosperous and close at hand. She smothered the little pang in her heart at parting, and said to little Mary, with a smile, that she would have had to part with them all the same when they were married. So the mother and the daughter drove down through the soft twilight and the dews to the Manor, not without brightness and good hope; while Charley and Loo rode away towards the darkening east, with a deeper shadow on their young faces, not quite sure how their home would look when their mother was away.

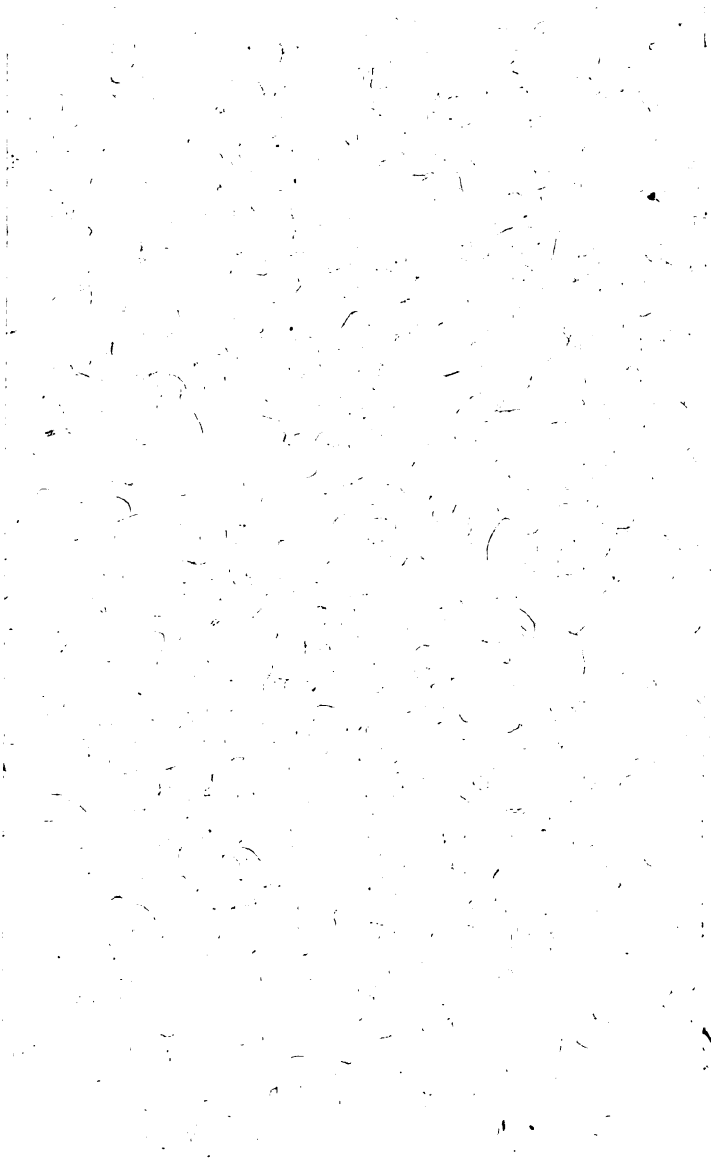
Mary stopped her ponies when she saw the little procession which had come out to meet her; the tears came into her bright eyes again. "It is so kind of you all," she said, kissing her hand to good Miss Harwood, "and it is so

pleasant to think I can see you oftener now."

"God bless you, my dear!" said the two old ladies who had come for love. And Mary said "Amen," and the children too; and so drove her ponies cheerfully, with smiles and tears, in through the open gates. Where, however, we will not follow Mrs. Summerhayes. Things had turned out a great deal better than could have been expected. Mr. Summerhayes was a man of the world, and knew how to make a virtue of necessity. He had given in gracefully and at once, and gained reputation thereby, nobody knowing what his private feelings were when Courtenay Gateshead's discovery came first upon his own widely-different plans. The fire in the west wing never was explained—nobody, indeed, inquired very deeply into it—and Mary, for her part, forgot it, or associated it only with old Gateshead's nightcap, to which she remained firmly convinced the old man had set fire on his way to bed. The fire at Fontanel was indeed associated with old Mr. Gateshead throughout the county, as was indeed a natural and perhaps correct supposition. Anyhow, nothing but the destruction of the west

wing had resulted from it, and that was rather an improvement than otherwise to the old place, in which Loo, till they were both married, was to keep house for her brother. Little Mary, who was easy in her temper, and happy as the day was long, went with Mrs. Summerhayes to the Manor—and Alf and Harry were to have two homes for their holidays. When Tom Summerhayes came home next day, he thought some fairy change had come over the Manor-house, and forgave his wife with magnanimity for all the trouble she had brought upon him. Mary accepted the pardon with gratitude, and Miss Laura and Miss Lydia thought Tom a hero; and so, with a tolerable amount of content on all sides, life began over again for the reunited couple. Mary had her own troubles still, like most people; but perhaps had not been much more happy as Mrs. Clifford than she was as Mrs. Summerhayes.

THE END.



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